

Norse mythology in video games: part of immanent Nordic regional branding.

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract</p> <p>An estimated 2,5 billion players in 2017, 143 billion revenues by 2020, video games have conquered the market and the homes of almost half the population. Often considered a niche media, recent figures prove that the market keeps on growing. When looking at it from a marketing point of view, video games appear to be the golden goose. Nation branding is all about marketing: selling the best of one's nation to other nations to attract investors, tourists, brains and technology.</p> <p>Why then, not consider video games as a mean to brand a nation? With such a large scale of influence and potential, one could argue video games seem like the perfect opportunity to make a nation known.</p> <p>Norse mythology did not -and does not- have that many supporters, but its influence is far-reaching: in movies, books, series and video games, it has been a source of inspiration for decades. Video games with Norse elements have been quite popular, especially since 2015. Couldn't Norse mythology be a mean to brand the Nordic countries? Does present-day nation branding in the Nordic countries use Norse elements: numerous gods, myths, importance of nature, folk traditions, history...?</p> <p>Using empirical research and specific video games research approach, the study determines the unique place of video games in the nation imaging and nation branding context. Relying on an interview as well as articles and player's reviews, the study offers a scope of research both social and professional on video games, their impact in the community, and the message they convey. As Norse mythology is a part of Nordic culture, and is also integrated in numerous games, the study focuses on this aspect within the video games to look for a connection between the modern technique of nation branding and the older concept of mythology and folklore, and its importance in the image of Nordic countries, within and without the region.</p>			
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CHAPTER 1: Introduction.

1.1: Presentation.

“Reality is broken. Game designers must fix it.”

This quote, by game designer Jane McGonigal, was part of an interview in 2011, where she argued that game designers have the power to bring players to change the world.¹ It resonates with the hypotheses in this study, that video games could play an influential role in nation branding and national images. The purpose of the study is two-fold: it focuses on Norse mythology within video games, and on video games as a part of nation branding. Even though my research does not focus on the historical accuracy and features within video games, the object of my study involves four games with Norse mythology aspects, and aims to tackle the questions of:

- I. What role video games are susceptible to play in nation branding?
- II. Can the use of Norse mythology in video games by other nations, be considered nation branding of the Nordic region?
- III. Is Norse mythology in video games a fundamental part of the Nordic region branding?

By studying two video games developed in the Nordic region, and two games developed outside of the region, this study aspires to uncover the role of these video games in the regional branding of the Nordic region, as well as how the image of the region might vary depending on where the games were developed. At the same time, the study's intentions are to discover if the two non-Nordic video games participate to the construction and/or continuance of the regional image of the Nordic nations. This will ultimately lead to the third question, and the approach and utilization of Norse mythology by these games in regard to nation branding and nation imaging.

¹Kim Zetter, *TED 2010: Reality is broken. Game designers must fix it.* Wired, 2010.

<https://www.wired.com/2010/02/jane-mcgonigal/>

1.2: Introducing a “new media” to old concepts.

Video games is a topic that was, until recently, rarely discussed and studied in academia; perhaps because it was not seen as serious enough, or for lack of interest, research on the matter used to be scarce, or taking to certain directions (for a time, a few negative ones²³). Quite often, video games were seen as a new media, something that has not been around for long and concerns younger generations only, although recent data shows that is erroneous⁴. Times are changing, and scholars and academics are becoming increasingly interested in video games, its impact on our culture and its long, rich history.⁵

It all began as early as the 1950's, and in the academic world. British professor A.S Douglas created the first video game, called *OXO* (popularly tic-tac-toe), at the university of Cambridge, for his doctoral dissertation. A few years later, in 1958, American physicist William Higinbotham created *Tennis for Two*⁶ on an analog computer. Only ten years after the first game was created, Steve Russell –a computer scientist at M.I.T (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)- invented a space combat video game -*Spacewar!*- that could be played on multiple computer installation: the first ever in history, in 1962. Though the very first games were computer-based, the first home console was born a few years after that, in the mind of American inventor Ralph Baer as “The Brown Box” (1967). Even though it did not meet with great success, Baer's invention opened the door to first Atari's arcade game *Pong* in 1972, an instant success that was ported on home console in 1975. Two years later, Atari launched the Atari 2600 console, which featured interchangeable game cartridges,

2 The controversial 2012 research “*Boom, Headshot!*” *Effect of Video Game Play and Controller Type on Firing Aim and Accuracy* by Jodi L. Whitaker and Brad J. Bushman was retracted by Journal of Communication Research after publication. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0093650212446622>

3 Gifted Child Quarterly published, then retracted the article Çetin, Y., Wai, J., Altay, C., & Bushman B. J. (2016). *Effects of violent media on verbal task performance in gifted and general cohort children*, in Gifted Child Quarterly, 60(4), 279-287 in 2016 for similar reasons to the previous article.

<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0016986216689054>

4 Entertainment Software Association, *2015 Sales, Demographic, and Usage Data Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry*. Washington, DC, 2015.

5 Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith & Susana Pajares Tosca, *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction 2nd edition*, introduction, page 2.

6 <https://www.bnl.gov/about/history/firstvideo.php>

multi-colored games and joysticks; the revolution, as well as the second generation⁷ of video game consoles, had just begun.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, video games became widely popular and some of the most famous titles in the history of games were released: *Space Invaders* in 1978, *Pac-Man* in 1980, and *Donkey Kong*, with the introduction of Mario, in 1981. They became too popular, in fact, leading to the 1983 major “game crash” in North America, due to the beginning of computer gaming competition with consoles, an oversaturated console game market, and the release of a lot of low-quality games, such as the infamous E.T., still often considered the worst game ever created.⁸⁹ The crash led to numerous bankruptcies and the video game industry would only begin to recover in 1985, when the Japanese Famicom was released in the United States under the name Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), inaugurating the third generation. The NES had improved console features over previous competitors, such as colors, sound, gameplay, and 8-bit graphics. Nintendo released a lot of video game franchises that became extremely popular, and still are today, such as *Super Marios Bros* (1985), *The Legend of Zelda* (1986) and *Metroid* (1986). As an example, *The Legend of Zelda*, since its first release in 1986, has expanded to 19 entries, as well as spin-offs, on every major Nintendo console. Nintendo also helped the video game industry after the massive crash of 1983 by imposing regulations on third-party games on its system; by limiting the number of low-quality software that could be produced, they would be avoiding another over-saturation of the market. However, many long-lasting franchises were released by third-party developers, such as Square’s *Final Fantasy*, Enix’s *Dragon Quest* (the two would merge to become Square Enix in 2003), Konami’s *Castlevania*, etc...

In 1989, Nintendo again pushed the limits of video games by releasing the Game Boy -with games in black and white- popularizing handheld gaming, the ancestor of mobile gaming, and launching the fourth generation of video games. The same year, Sega released the Genesis, a 16-bit console that did not succeed as well as its competitor, the NES. But with the release of *Sonic the Hedgehog* in 1991, the Genesis finally caught up to the

7 The word “generation” might sometimes be replaced by the word “wave” in video game history, but both terms refer to the same thing.

8 <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35560458>

9 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2614109/Atari-2600-E-T-worst-game-discovered-New-Mexico-landfill-dig.html>

NES...just in time for Nintendo to release the Super NES, and kickoff the first real console war.¹⁰ Both consoles released a heap of popular games, most notably combat games, such as popular violent game *Mortal Kombat*, and just-as-popular *Street Fighter II*. *Mortal Kombat*, which depicted blood and gore on the Genesis, is partly responsible for the creation of the Videogame Rating Council by Sega in 1993, whose role is to provide descriptive labeling for every game sold on Sega home console. From this council was born the actual Entertainment Software Rating Board, which rates video games based on content (blood, gore, violence, harsh language, etc...)¹¹. Video games made it onto the big screen, with movies based on video games beginning to release in the early 1990s, with *Super Mario Bros* in 1993, followed by *Street Fighter* and *Mortal Kombat*. Movies based on video games are still being released today (*Warcraft*, *Max Payne*, *Resident Evil: The Final Chapter*...).

3D gaming was the start of the fifth generation of video games; the transition from 2D to 3D left some behind, and installed some of today's big companies, such as Sony, who breached and dominated the market with first the Playstation in 1995, then with the Playstation 2 in 2000, which still is the best-selling game console of all times. From cartridges, the consoles evolved to using DVDs. This fifth generation of games marked the end of Sega as a console maker and became a third-party software company after the commercial flop of the Dreamcast in 2001. The early 2000s kicked off the modern age of gaming, and the sixth generation of video games, with high definition games and new ways of playing, involving motion capture and sensitivity (Wii and Microsoft Kinect). The Wii appealed to a wider audience and sold more than the Playstation 3 and the Xbox 360, mostly due to its motion-sensitive remotes and marketing of "active gaming". Video games also conquered the online world, with the rise of MMOs¹² and MMORPGs¹³; the PC online multiplayer sector's revenue in 2016 was almost 20 billion dollars.¹⁴ Still online, but in a different category, video games launched on social media platform Facebook, and on mobile

10 <https://venturebeat.com/2014/08/20/heres-who-won-each-console-war/>

11 http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings_guide.aspx

12 Massively multiplayer online. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massively_multiplayer_online_game

13 Massively multiplayer online role-playing games.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massively_multiplayer_online_role-playing_game

14 <https://superdata-research.myshopify.com/products/mmo-market-report>

devices (smartphones, tablets) to reach a more casual audience.¹⁵¹⁶ Though less profitable than PC or online games, mobile games are widely popular, and *Angry Birds* alone generated about 152 million euros in 2012 for Rovio.¹⁷ Merchandise accounted for 45% of said revenue. In 2011, video games entered the physical world with the plastic figures of *Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure*. The figurines, sold separately from the game, need to be placed onto an accessory that reads a tag, bringing said character into the game. Disney and others followed, but the concept is not widely popular.

In 2012 began the eighth, and current generation of video games, with the release of the Nintendo Wii U, then of the Playstation 4 and Xbox One (2013). Microsoft and Sony are currently ahead in the console market, with Nintendo lagging a little behind, following the commercial failure of the Wii U, discontinued in 2017. Mobile gaming is experiencing a lapse in revenue and interest, and even though handheld consoles have been less popular in recent years, the Nintendo Switch (a hybrid of “living-room” console and handheld console) was the best-selling product during this year’s (2017) Black Friday, perhaps due to its innovation.¹⁸ Virtual Reality (VR)¹⁹ is no doubt the next step in video gaming, with major companies investing and focusing on this computer technology that immerses the player in a virtual environment, in which the player physically interacts.²⁰

As can be seen from this short historical overview, video games have grown in popularity in recent years, sparking numerous debates. We now find game scholars, game studies, and game research in a variety of fields. The public debate used to focus on the

15 The term “casual gamer” is frequently used with two functions: 1) to describe gamers who play casual games, which have simpler rules and require less time to learn skills, for example mobile games. 2) To refer to gamers who play less frequently than other gamers, such as the core or hardcore gamers.

<https://venturebeat.com/2011/04/30/core-and-casual-whats-the-difference/>

16 <https://venturebeat.com/2011/04/30/core-and-casual-whats-the-difference/>

17 <http://www.businessinsider.com/angry-birds-made-200-million-in-2012-2013-4?r=US&IR=T&IR=T>

18 <https://landing.adobe.com/en/na/solutions/digital-index/ctir-2840-holiday-predictions-2017/>

19 “Virtual reality is the term used to describe a three-dimensional, computer generated environment which can be explored and interacted with by a person. That person becomes part of this virtual world or is immersed within this environment and whilst there, is able to manipulate objects or perform a series of actions.” <https://www.vrs.org.uk/virtual-reality/what-is-virtual-reality.html>

20 <http://fortune.com/2015/10/07/virtual-reality-mainstream/>

psychological and sociological aspects, with the recurring narrative: do video games lead to violence / violent behaviors?²¹ And how do video games affect the players?²²

Nowadays, the research on video games is a lot wider and much more comprehensive, with fields like history, media studies, gender studies²³, biology and even neuroscience²⁴ being interested in the topic.²⁵ However, there have been very few, if any, studies on video games reflecting on and participating to, nation branding. There exist a bit of research on national image and nation building and video games, though it is also scarce.²⁶ A study such as this one could resonate with current research on video games and history²⁷, as well as studies on national image. Over the years, nation branding has become increasingly close to marketing companies, and is not exclusively the affair of the state anymore; as the video game industry is growing larger every year, there is a strong possibility that video games will be used as a promotional media using nation branding techniques in the future.

Studying Norse mythology within this framework requires a bit of historical and conceptual context. In the video game world, Norse mythology has been a source of inspiration for decades. The first popular “Norse” games, though usually centered on Vikings, appeared during the 1980s. Literature, video games, and movies have always been inspired by mythology in general, but in recent years, video games have popularized Vikings and Norse myths beyond what had been done over the past two decades.²⁸ What is Norse mythology, and how does this fit into this study? I would like to stress that the term Norse mythology refers to the myths of Scandinavia during the age of Vikings (ca. 800 to ca. 1100), and not to Viking lifestyle.

21 <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/07/25/health/video-games-and-violence/>

22 Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., *Understanding Video Games*, introduction, page 4.

23 <http://www.radford.edu/~mzorilla2/thesis/gamerepresentation.html>

24 Marc Palaus, Elena M. Marron, Raquel Viejo-Sobera and Diego Redolar-Ripoll, *Neural Basis of Video Gaming: A Systematic Review*. Front. Hum. Neurosci. 11:248. doi: 10.3389/fnhum.2017.00248, 2017.

25 Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., *Understanding Video Games*, introduction, page 4.

26 Chi-Ying Chen, *Is the Video Game a Cultural Vehicle?*, Games and Culture, Vol.8, Issue 6, pp.408-427, 2013.

27 Derek Fewster & Ylva Grufstedt, *Introduction: Gamevironments of the Past – A Broad Take on Games and History* in Gamevironments Special Issue: Gamevironments of the Past, issue n°5, 2016.

28 Ewen Hosie, *Why Are So Many Video Game Developers Going Norse in 2015?*, August 11th 2015.

Norse mythology is related to Germanic mythology, of which it shares many features, but originates in the Nordic countries; namely Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland. Finland had its own mythology, which was only partially influenced by Norse mythology and Viking culture. The mythology is often grim, and does not always represent the gods as heroic figures, but as human-like in character and behavior, who have flaws, and make mistakes, and bad choices also. Nonetheless, there are glimpses of richness, humor and splendor in the myths. The main source of information about the Norse mythology are the manuscripts referred to as *Poetic Edda* (also called *Elder Edda*) and the *Prose Edda* (also *Younger Edda*, or *Snorri's Edda*)²⁹. The *Poetic Edda* is a collection of Old Norse poems, compiled by an unknown author and published during the second half of the 13th century. The materials within the *Poetic Edda* are however much older than that, and are believed to have been compiled between the 9th and 11th century. It is divided in two parts, the first one narrating the creation and foretold destruction of the world of Norse mythology; it also contains stories and myths about Norse deities.

The second part focuses on Norse legends and heroes. The *Prose Edda* is more a manual of poetry, among which are mythological stories. The primary goal of this *Edda* was to allow Icelandic poets to understand the alliterative verse, a form of verse that uses alliteration instead of rhyme. It was written by Snorri Sturluson, an Icelandic historian and poet, also published during the 13th century. There are other manuscripts and texts referring to mythic events of figures as well, especially within the Icelandic sagas, written by Icelanders themselves. Danish historian and author of the first complete history of Denmark, Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* on the history of the Danish people is another source for Norse mythology, as it begins with the ancient heroes and pagan gods of the Danes. Both Snorri Sturlurson's *Prose Edda* and Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* are more structured -and therefore easier to work from for scholars- than the *Poetic Edda*, written for an audience that was familiar with both skaldic poetry and Norse mythology. The *Prose Edda* is one of the main reasons why we could catch a glimpse of what Norse mythology was like at all, opening the way to research on the *Poetic Edda* and what we know of it today. Norse mythology is rich in characters, stories, and backgrounds that can make for interesting virtual characters, and that explains part of its popularity in video games. Norse mythology has

29 <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Edda>

another advantage for modern media, and that is that it has a lot of gaps: there is a lot known about Greek and Roman mythology because of the extensive paleontological, anthropological, and social studies about them. Norse mythology became popular later; however, images of “the North” have been around for centuries, as early as Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome.

What video games do is that they usually create their own universe around either the Eddur³⁰ directly, around what is known of Norse mythology, or around stereotypes that are also found in other media. Creative directors can decide -or not- to fill in the gaps of what is not, of what is speculation. It becomes interesting to see how different games portray different characters, how they utilize the knowledge available on Norse mythology, and what message they might convey. Norse mythology is also a good catalyst for a strong, Nordic image, with powerful gods, humans interacting with said gods and earning their favor in the after-life, the ultimate battle of Ragnarök³¹...

As images of the North have been a central focus point on image and nation-building, the use of Norse mythology in video games can utilize the same concepts of imagery to convey a message, or portray a nation. The act of portraying a nation is an old concept, as historically, persons of power have aimed to present the better aspects of their homelands. Encompassing public and private sector, nation branding is a process of managing the reputation of one's country on a local and international level with the ambition to enhance the country's reputation in international relations. The consensus is that governments decide how the country should be branded, and what to do to make it happen. It is increasingly true, however, that branding is not done by the governments themselves directly, but by marketing specialists, who devise concepts for the country they are promoting. Nation branding is, after all, “the application of corporate marketing concepts and techniques to countries, in the interests of enhancing their reputation in international relations.”³² The state progressively delegates to public and private contractors the task of managing the country's image abroad.

³³ When it is unarguable that the state supports the nation brand, it becomes public

³⁰ Eddur is the plural of Edda in Icelandic.

³¹ The name for the end of the world in Norse mythology.

³² Pauline Kerr, Geoffrey Wiseman, *Diplomacy in a Globalizing World: Theories and Practice*, 2013. p. 354.

³³ Melissa Aronczyk, *Branding the Nation. The Global Business of National Identity*, 2013. p. 25.

diplomacy; though, as this study argues, the state does not always have control over what image will be retained in other countries, despite their best nation branding effort. For the purpose of this study, I argue that nation branding is not always and only a state matter, but can begin and be created by individuals or companies. Nation branding is complex and multi-faceted, and it seems reductive to make it into a one-way street. Policy advisor Simon Anholt spoke of the importance of organizing the various messages about a nation that come from the various instances within a country; the state itself, as part of a team alongside business and civil society, Arnholt argues, would then have a role of finding the best ways to promote these different voices for them to appear as one smooth, structured front to the outside world.³⁴ If we take the example of Finland, examples of branding stemming from outside governmental scope are numerous.

The most prominent one would be the Moomins – opinions may vary on where Santa Claus comes from around the world, but the Moomins are always associated with Finland³⁵. Writer Tove Jansson published the first book in 1945, and the franchise has constantly developed since. Most movies related to the Moomins have been produced abroad, and the famous Moomin World in Naantali -created by media professional Dennis Livson- is getting a twin in Japan in 2019.³⁶ Ever-present on tourist brochures, and Finland's official tourism website³⁷, the Moomins' books have been translated into more than fifty languages, and made Tove Jansson the most-read Finnish author in the world. Nowadays, private companies use the Moomins to attract clients, local and foreign, but it has also become a part of the Finnish brand, and something that people are aware of when talking about Finland. As stated earlier, the Moomins did not begin as a state matter, but were rather used as a way to portray Finland when their popularity at home and abroad soared; the state of Finland may have had to "organize" the popularity of the Moomins, but it is the characters themselves that created that part of the Finnish brand, and not the other way around: creating trumps advertising.³⁸

³⁴ Simon Arnholt, *Competitive identity: The new brand management for nations, cities and regions*.

³⁵ <http://www.visitfinland.com/article/long-live-the-moomins/>

³⁶ <https://www.moomin.com/en/blog/the-grand-opening-date-for-the-new-moominvalley-theme-park-in-japan-now-confirmed/>

³⁷ <http://www.visitfinland.com/tags/moomins/>

³⁸ Simon Anholt, *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, Volume 4, Issue 1, pages 1-6.

If we stay closer to video games, Finland offers numerous examples of games that have helped put the country on the map: Snake, Max Payne, Angry Birds, Clash of Clans... The country has produced a high amount of popular games and continues to attract investors.³⁹ Video games are making it into the educational field as well, as Rovio is an “important voice for Finland’s country branding”,⁴⁰ contributing to Finland’s high rating in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)⁴¹ and developing Finland’s image abroad.⁴² As ranking from Brand Finance indicate that Finland is the strongest of the Nordic brands; however, Iceland was the fastest growing brand in 2016, with a surge of 83%.

This increase in one of the smallest countries in the Nordic is interesting, and directly relates to the topic at hand in this study. With a population of roughly 300 000 inhabitants, Iceland is often a bit forgotten when speaking of the Nordic region, perhaps due to its size and location. That its brand now rivals with the bigger Nordic countries, especially after being hit hard by the economic crisis in 2008, is remarkable. And it has a lot to do with external branding. The increase can be explained by the high amount of tourism in the country, which is a rather popular destination for both Europeans and North Americans. And according to Business Insider Nordic, the US series Game of Thrones, of which the winter scenes are principally filmed in Iceland, is largely responsible for it.⁴³ Icelandic nature was launched forward with the popularity of the series, attracting tourists who want to experience the feeling of the series, much like New Zealand capitalized on the filming of Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit. That Game of Thrones chose Iceland as a filming location has contributed to the rise of the Icelandic brand directly, and affected the way Iceland is viewed.

With these examples, I intend to show that there is room for nation branding outside of governmental scope, and outside of the national scope as well. As any other media, video games use marketing tools and techniques to sell worldwide. The recent numbers on video game sales, number of players and reach indicate that video games companies use these tools

³⁹ <https://finland.fi/?s=video%20games>

⁴⁰ Karen Trimmer, *Political Pressures on Educational and Social Research: International Perspectives*, page 85.

⁴¹ <https://finland.fi/business-innovation/finnish-education-apps-more-than-a-game/>

⁴² Karen Trimmer, *Political Pressures on Educational and Social Research: International Perspectives*, page 86.

⁴³ <http://nordic.businessinsider.com/iceland-is-the-best-performing-brand-in-the-world-2017-10/>

correctly. From the argument that nation branding uses similar marketing techniques, video games have the ability to play a role in nation image and nation branding. Even though most argue that video games, like TV shows and movies, are set in fiction and do not represent real-life events or locations, when the environment in a video game is set in a real-life location, it can have real-life consequences.

In 2009, assistant professor of anthropology Michael A. Di Giovine already talked about the problem of portraying the ruins of Angkor⁴⁴ being looted and its prized possessions sold on the black market – a real-life problem that prompted UNESCO to react negatively to the *Tomb Raider* film made after the first and second games of the franchise. The portrayal of destructive tomb raiding, inaccurate representation of artifacts and the West's victory over the dangers of Angkor are what triggered a response, warning about the dangers of it happening in real-life, and about the image of the sites in general.⁴⁵ As recently as last year, the government of Bolivia issued a formal complaint to its French embassy about *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Wildlands*, a Ubisoft game set in Bolivia. Bolivia's Interior Minister Carlos Romero complained that the game unfairly portrays Bolivia as a narco-state⁴⁶ under the control of a drug cartel. In the game, the player controls an elite covert operations unit on a mission called Operation Kingslayer, which is centered around the destabilization and possibly annihilation of the Santa Blanca drug cartel in Bolivia. As the game unfolds, it reveals that the fictitious government of Bolivia made a deal with the Santa Blanca drug cartel to keep doing their business, as long as casualties were kept to a minimum, after the government's efforts to stifle the rise of Santa Blanca failed. After threats of legal action and a demand that the French government intervene, Ubisoft issued a public statement: "In a statement to Reuters on Thursday, Ubisoft said the game is "a work of fiction" and that Bolivia was chosen as the background for the game because of its "magnificent landscapes and rich culture."⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Abandoned capital city of the Khmer empire in Cambodia.

⁴⁵ Michael A. Di Giovine, *The Heritage-scape UNESCO, World Heritage, and Tourism*, pages 396-397.

⁴⁶ A state whose economy depends heavily on narcotics and other drugs.

<https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/narco-state>

⁴⁷ Reuters, *Bolivia complains to France about its portrayal in video game*.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bolivia-france-videogames/bolivia-complains-to-france-about-its-portrayal-in-video-game-idUSKBN1692PK>

The reach of video games into national image already exists, and can contribute to the branding of a nation. With the two previous examples, we have an external image portrayed within the real-life settings of the locations, bringing fiction into reality and vice-versa. Nation branding is made to send out a positive image, but sometimes, additionally, to counter possible negative images seen from an external point of view. *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Wildlands* and the controversy it created in Bolivia reminds us that the positive image being worked on is not necessarily reflected outside of the nation.

1.2: Methodology.

Empirical research in the form of four case studies seemed the best way to analyze both Norse mythology in video games, and video games in the wider context of nation branding. As empirical research is based on observed and measured phenomena, and derives knowledge from experience rather than theory, it is the closest way to define the phenomena being studied (the use of Norse mythology and video games in nation branding), but also to describe the process used to study this phenomena (interviews, player's opinions, national documents concerning nation branding). However, I also needed something more specific when it came to studying the video games themselves.

I used Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith & Susana Pajares Tosca's, *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction 2nd edition* to help me find the best way to study and analyze video games in an academic context. From the four major types of analysis, the ones most suited for this research are the "Player" and "Culture" types of analyses.⁴⁸ The Player method uses observation, interviews and surveys to focus on the use of games and game communities. The Culture method relates closely to cultural and sociological studies in that it is defined by interviews and textual analysis of games as cultural objects, as a "part of the media ecology".⁴⁹ As *Understanding Video Games* later

⁴⁸ Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., *Understanding Video Games*, pages 9-10.

⁴⁹ Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., pages 9-10.

explains, the studying approach for this study would fall under the “situationist group” type of analysis and school of thought.⁵⁰

The use of these methods resulted in sending out interviews to video game companies and developers to gain insight to their methods of video game development, and also to see if they had an opinion on what they were portraying, if they purposefully tried to sell a certain image through their games, and more generally if they had a perception of their game in a nation branding context. Most questions were similar, though some were specific to each video game companies or game developers. I tried to limit the number of questions for each gaming company, as I did not want to overwhelm them, and to offer them a better chance to respond. Alongside the interviews, I decided to search through player’s reviews of the four games, to see if anyone spoke of the Norse mythology aspect of the games, and in which terms. As I use the gaming platform Steam to play the games, I started from the Steam review panel to see what I could find. The screenshots of the player’s reviews are attached in the appendices⁵¹. Since the interviews give this study professional answers, it was interesting to see if the same questions could be used in an informal context, with players’ reviews. I first thought about re-writing the reviews myself within the study with references to the originals, but for the sake of authenticity, decided on using screenshots instead.

I wanted a third opinion on the matter, and contacted nation branding officials in the Nordic countries for interviews. Two of these officials had worked on a project in 2013- Nordic Cool- to promote the Nordic countries, design and culture in Washington, DC, USA. The two others are current representatives within the Nordic countries, who touch upon nation branding affairs and Nordic co-operation on a regular basis.

With these diverse perspectives, I was hoping to obtain and share knowledge from distinctive sources, and aspects, concerning both video games, and nation branding.

1.3: Delimitations, Limitations and Suppositions.

⁵⁰ Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., page 11.

⁵¹ See appendices A through G.

A video game is rather free to interpret a character, its design and background story, as well as its role within the game. As a general rule, movies and TV series are more restricted by a myriad of factors: money, potential feedback on release, the threat of cancellation (in case of TV series) if there is not enough audience to follow the show, etc. But most of all, characters on TV and in films have to be pretty, interesting, and usually heroic in their own way, especially when the theme involves mythology; a good example of this is the Marvel movie *Thor*.⁵² In Norse mythology, Thor is described as a chubby, red-haired, fully bearded god who travels to the human realm and provides to the poor on the way, but whose temper is not to be trifled with.⁵³ It was believed that he would provide bountiful harvests, food and other commodities that were important at the time of Vikings if he was respected, and sacrifices were made to honor him. Disobedience and neglect would, on the other hand, brew up storms and wither crops. In certain Nordic regions, Thor was worshipped more thoroughly than the All-Father Odin and was the most important god-figure for many villages. In Iceland, around the 9th century, roughly a quarter of the island's population sported a name related to Thor.⁵⁴

Of course, Marvel's Thor is a modern twist on the old legends, but the actor portraying him could hardly be further from the mythological description of the character. It is nothing new that the North American (USA mostly) movie and comics industry is heavily based on looks, and it is important that a character not only looks good and presents well, their background story has to be equally fascinating. A book, or a TV series have similar requirements: the story has to be interesting enough to keep people reading or watching. Often, Norse mythology becomes a fantasy filled with epic quests, heroes and obstacles, forgetting the grim aspect of the original, and trading it for the sensational. Though these make for interesting and entertaining stories, video games do not need to be epic to be popular⁵⁵, and do not always require to be perfect-looking.⁵⁶ They can more freely explore

52 Kevin Feige (Producer), & Kenneth Branagh (Director). 2011. *Thor* [Motion Picture]. USA: Paramount Pictures.

53 Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Penguin Book of Norse Myths*, Penguin, 2011, pages 80-81.

54 Rudolf Simek, Angela Hall (translator), *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, University of Rochester Press, 1993. p. 320.

55 <http://store.steampowered.com/app/281750/Munin/>

56 http://store.steampowered.com/app/210950/Rune_Classic/

the unforgiving world of Norse mythology, the dark tales of the gods; there is no necessity for heroes and happy endings.⁵⁷

The games that I picked and will describe in the following chapter of this study vary in that respect, which will bring us back to what I mentioned above between the culture of epic versus non-epic characters. Video games are often overlooked, as they are seen as a niche media that does not reach a large part of the population. However, recent numbers suggest otherwise⁵⁸ and video games might have just as much potential in national image and nation branding as any other form of art, along with other media.

CHAPTER 2: Material review.

2.1: Presentation of the video games.

In this section, I will draw from the video games' websites and my own experience of the games for a short presentation of the universe of each video game, the structure, characters and story. I do not analyze the games yet in this section, but rather try to present them neutrally while trying to put their universes into historical context, with what is known of Norse mythology for better analysis and comprehension later on.

Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice.⁵⁹

Inspired by Norse mythology and Celtic culture, Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice is a dark fantasy action-adventure game developed and published by Ninja Theory (based in Cambridge, England) in August 2017. The game is described as being "The story is about a Pict based on Celtic mythology and Norse mythology. The game focused on Senua's point of view, as she embarks on a very personal journey through a hellish underworld made up

⁵⁷ http://store.steampowered.com/app/237990/The_Banner_Saga/

⁵⁸ See appendices H through J.

⁵⁹ <http://www.hellblade.com>

of Senua's psychotic manifestations of her reality and mind."⁶⁰ It took me a little over 10 hours to finish the game.

Senua, the main character, is of Celtic decent; however, her journey takes her through Norse landscapes and mythological places, with her journey ending in Hel. At the beginning of the game, the landscape is very "earthy": there is a grove, a forest, a lush jungle-like environment.⁶¹ However, the landscape is already scary: there are corpses everywhere, and Senua's voices warn her that "this is not a place of rest". The lush green aspect does not last very long, as Senua is pushing forward to the "land of mist and fog", where the forests are darker, oppressing and full of voices (or are they?). A quote from the game gives the player a hint: "Do you feel it? It's like crossing into another world that looks the same, but feels different."

Landscapes will vary from forest, to coastal ("Sea of Knives")⁶², to barren and burnt meadows. Viking elements are present throughout the game, such as long houses, long boats, architecture and enemies. Senua's enemies are Viking-inspired in appearance⁶³ and could be the manifestations of Senua's mind reliving through the trauma of the Viking invasion that took away her love and home. The enemies are ruthless and cruel barbarians trying to stop Senua from fulfilling her journey's goal. Folklore and Norse mythology are present through the enemies, the puzzles and mostly the final boss, Hel. The explanations during the game are dramatized, but rather accurate to current scholarly knowledge on Norse mythology and Vikings. Runes are also present during the game, on rune stones that give insights into the folklore and mythology surrounding the story of the game.

The setting is Nordic, but meant to scare: for example, a nice forest path overlooking a stream will lead to a waterfall, through which Senua will find a pile of burnt corpses. Vikings, and Norse mythology, are represented as unfriendly and barbaric, drawing from the stereotypical image of Vikings throughout history.

The bosses of the game draw from Norse mythology and Nordic folklore:

⁶⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hellblade:_Senua%27s_Sacrifice

⁶¹ See illustration n°4.

⁶² See illustration n°6.

⁶³ See illustrations n°1 through 3.

- The first boss, Valraven, is a supernatural raven from Danish folklore and folksongs. It originates from ravens who feasted on the corpses of chieftains or kings left dead and unburied on the battlefield, and who then were able to shape-shift into knights.⁶⁴ In the game, Valraven is a trickster capable of creating illusions to bend Senua's mind before meeting her in combat. Valraven is agile and able to dash in and out of Senua's range, as if flying, mimicking a raven.
- The second boss, Surtr, is a fire giant from Múspell in Norse mythology.⁶⁵ He possesses a flaming sword and a crown of fire, and is a major figure during Ragnarök, as he sets the world on fire. The game version is accurately representative of the myth, even though it is a rather unknown mythological figure.
- The third boss, Fenrir, is a monstrous wolf in Norse mythology. Son of Loki and the giantess Angrboða, he is foretold to kill Odin during Ragnarök. In the game, Fenrir pursues Senua's, hiding in shadows and tormenting her from afar in her waking nightmares. Later on, she is forced to confront him, and Fenrir proves to be a tough boss to vanquish.
- The final boss, Hela, is the guardian of Helheim, the realm of the dead; Hel, in Norse mythology. Hel is the daughter of Loki and Angrboða, and was appointed by Odin to rule over the realm of the dead. As such, she receives a portion of the dead, those that did not make it into Valhalla because they died of sickness or old age. She is depicted as half-blue, half-flesh colored with a gloomy appearance.⁶⁶ In the game, Hela is the whole reason why Senua set on her journey: to bargain for the soul of her beloved, Dillion. Hel refuses, and tells Senua to let go, but Senua wants to confront and fight her; Hel then sends waves and waves of Viking-looking minions to defeat Senua. Hela is not fought directly, and downright refuses to confront Senua straightforwardly.

Hela is the ultimate representation of Senua's psychosis, and Senua's goal is to defeat her, to "cure" herself of what she refers to as "the Darkness". Even though she has gone through

⁶⁴ Evald Tang Kristensen, *Danske Sagn: Som De Har Lyd I Folkemunde*, Nyt Nordisk Forlag, Arnold Busck, Copenhagen, 1980.

⁶⁵ In the Poetic Edda.

⁶⁶ Hel is depicted in both Eddur.

this long and arduous journey, at the very end, Senua still questions herself: is Hel a lie, a part of her psychosis? Or is she really here, and is Senua trying to defeat the curator of souls from Norse mythology? The fact that the game was made to experience what it is like to live with psychosis is helpful here, as it constantly leaves the player guessing what is illusion and what is existent, what is mythology and what is real.

In the end, Senua seems to be defeated by Hela and reunited with Dillion, who appears during the final cut-scene⁶⁷. However, we then see the goddess picking up Dillion's head (a "trinket" that Senua carries along during her journey to ultimately try to bargain with Hela) and throwing it off a cliff, into a void below. The goddess' appearance is then revealed, and she looks precisely like Senua. The game suggests that Senua is finally coming to terms with Dillion's loss and death, but also that her journey was in vain, as he was already beyond her reach when she set out to save his soul. The voices that followed Senua throughout the game are silent during the last cutscene, but re-appear at the end, to show that mental illness cannot be "defeated", only managed. Senua accepts her own "darkness" as she moves on from the loss of Dillion.

Jotun.

Developed by Thunder Lotus Games (based in Montreal, Canada), and released in September 2015, Jotun is a "hand-drawn action-exploration game set in Norse mythology. In Jotun, you play Thora, a Norse warrior who has died an inglorious death and must prove herself to the Gods to enter Valhalla."⁶⁸

Jotun is a relatively short game that I finished for about ten hours. The name "Jotun" is derived from Jotunheim, the world of giants in Norse mythology.⁶⁹ The main character, Thora, is a female Viking warrior who died ingloriously and is challenged by Odin to prove

⁶⁷ "A cutscene or event scene (sometimes in-game cinematic or in-game movie) is a sequence in a video game that is not interactive, breaking up the gameplay. Such scenes could be used to show conversations between characters, to the player, set the mood, reward the player, introduce new gameplay elements, show the effects of a player's actions, create emotional connections, improve pacing or foreshadow future events." (Wikipedia) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cutscene>

⁶⁸ <http://jotungame.com>

⁶⁹ <https://norse-mythology.org/cosmology/the-nine-worlds/jotunheim/>

her worth in order to enter Valhalla, the “hall of the slain” (Old Norse: Vallhöll).⁷⁰ Thora drowned at sea while with her men instead of in battle, making her an unsuccessful warrior in Viking tradition, who would not have been able to reach Valhalla⁷¹, and is the starting point of the game. Unlike in the Norse myths, she is not dragged down by Aegir and Rán, the deities of the sea that collect the souls of those dying at sea. Whereas Thora retains the stereotypical “strong Viking” character aspect, the fact that she is female opens up questions and possibilities, which will be discussed further into the study.

Everything in Jotun is inspired by -and more often than not, directly taken from- Norse mythology. The developers went as far as offering the games’ voices in Icelandic, for a fuller immersion into the game and the mythology. Icelandic is the most closely related language to Old Norse, spoken at the time of Vikings, and in which most of the myths of Norse mythology were written. Whether it is the general ambiance, the places portrayed, the enemies, the Gods... the references to actual Norse mythology are abundant:

- *Ginnungagap*: The “yawning void” in Norse mythology, the primordial void from which spawns the myth of creation of the Norse world. In Jotun, it is the game’s hub⁷²; an interesting parallel.
- *Mimir’s well* (Old Norse Mímirsbrennr): In Norse mythology, the well is located beneath one of the three roots of the world tree Yggdrasil. The water of the well contains untold wisdom, driving Odin to sacrifice one of his eyes in order to gain knowledge from the well.⁷³ In the game, Mimir’s well becomes a fountain of regeneration, granting the player with “life”. One is present in every level of the game, featuring Mimir’s head, whose gaze follows the player as they move around it.
- *Iðunn*: A goddess described as the granter of eternal youth, and associated with apples in Norse mythology. She is also the wife of Bragi (god of poetry). Forced by the giant Þjazi, Loki lured Iðunn into a wood, where she was captured by Þjazi shape-shifted into an eagle, who brings her to Jotunheim. Iðunn’s absence causes the gods

70 Andy Orchard, *Dictionary of Norse myth and legend*, Cassell, 1997.

71 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guides/zspjxsg>

72 A level in a video game which links to all the other levels and serves as a main area that the player will use to progress through the game. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Hub%20World>

73 Rudolf Simek, Angela Hall (translation), *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, D.S. Brewer, New Ed. 1996.

to grow old, and Loki is tasked to bring her back.⁷⁴ In the game, Iðunn's golden apples are hidden throughout the game (one in each realm) and grant additional life points.

- There is also a level with an eagle in the game, which could represent Þjazi.

Only Odin appears as a Norse god in Jotun, but other gods are present nevertheless; they grant Thora with powers such as healing and speed to help her conquer the challenge brought by Odin. Runes are present as keys to unlock boss fights⁷⁵, and the names of runes are used for bosses and mini-bosses instead of the jötun's names. The landscapes and setting are mythological ones, each realm is a place that exists in mythology, or is heavily inspired by it.⁷⁶

Year Walk.

Developed by Simogo, a Swedish gaming company based in Malmö, Year Walk was first released as a mobile game in February 2013. Due to its popularity, it was expanded to become a PC game a year later, in March 2014. The game is rather short: it took me about five hours to get through it.

“In the old days man tried to catch a glimpse of the future in the strangest of ways.

Venture out into the dark woods where strange creatures roam, on a vision quest set in 19th century Sweden. Solve cryptic puzzles, touch and listen in your search to foresee the future and finally discover if your loved one will love you back.”⁷⁷

The first part of the description of the game on Simogo's website succinctly explains the Swedish folk tradition of Årsgång, or year walk. The name “Year Walk” comes from Swedish folklore, an ancient form of divination called *Årsgång*. This complex form of

⁷⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iðunn>

⁷⁵ “In video-gaming, a boss is a significant computer-controlled enemy. A fight with a boss character is commonly referred to as a boss battle or boss fight.” (Wikipedia).
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boss_\(video_gaming\)#cite_note-1](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boss_(video_gaming)#cite_note-1)

⁷⁶ See illustrations n° 7 and 8.

⁷⁷ <http://simogo.com/work/year-walk-ios/>

divination was practiced during the end of the year, either at Christmas or New Year's Eve.⁷⁸ The "year walker" had to follow a set of instructions and work through challenges (encounters with supernatural beings being the most common ones); pending that they managed to do that, they could catch a glimpse of what would happen the following year.⁷⁹

"THE GAME

Experience the ancient Swedish phenomena of year walking through a different kind of first person adventure that blurs the line between two and three dimensions, reality and the supernatural as well as fact and fiction."⁸⁰

In this game, similarly to *Through the Woods*, the distinction between "real" world and mythological world is not obvious, until the first encounter with a folklore or mythological creature. The landscape of *Year Walk* is a dark forest during winter, with opaque skies and snow-covered ground, muffled sounds, and otherwise absolute silence. The landscape is portrayed as it would be in real life, it is not idealized. There are few buildings throughout the game, all traditionally Nordic (wooden cabins, cellars, a mill...). Furthermore, there are symbols resembling runes that act as keys to unlock other parts of the game. *Year Walk* also features a journal, where the mythical creatures encountered are listed:

- Näcken, a shapeshifting water spirit that lured women and children to drown in bodies of water.⁸¹ Some of them were also harmless, however.
- Skogsrå, "forest spirit"⁸², the same creature as the Norwegian Huldre from *Through the Woods*.
- Bäckahästen, "Brook Horse". A white horse that appears next to rivers, especially when there is fog. The one that rides on its back will be unable to get down, and the horse will then jump into the river to drown the unfortunate rider.⁸³

78 <http://simogo.com/2012/10/05/the-strange-phenomena-of-year-walking/>

79 Tommy Kuusela, *Swedish year walk: from folk tradition to computer game in: Island Dynamics Conference on Folk Belief & Traditions of the Supernatural: Experience, Place, Ritual, & Narrative*, Shetland Isles, UK, 24–30 March 2014. [Online].

80 <http://simogo.com/work/year-walk-ios/>

81 <http://www.sprakochfolkminnen.se/om-oss/for-dig-i-skolan/arkivvaskan/nacken-och-backahasten-i-folktron.html>

82 <http://www.sprakochfolkminnen.se/om-oss/for-dig-i-skolan/arkivvaskan/skogsraet-i-folktron.html>

83 See reference in note 69.

- Myling(s), incarnations of the souls of unbaptized children. They will roam as spirits until they can be buried properly, often chasing wanderers to ask them to carry them to a graveyard. If the person fails to bring them there (the myling get heavier as they approach the graveyard), they will kill that person.⁸⁴
- Nattraven, nocturnal ravens sporting holes in their wings. The legend says that if you look through them and see the night sky, you will soon fall ill and die.
- Kyrkogrimen, “Church Grim” who guards churches from desecration. It may appear as a priest.

Year Walk relies on folklore and myths heavily, though there are real life elements; once again, what is real and what is myths are blended into one. Similar to *Through the Woods*, Year Walk is a walking simulator⁸⁵: there is no combat, and in Year Walk, the character cannot die; there is only exploration. What is particularly striking in this game is the silence and stillness; it is quite impressive how the developers managed to capture the essence of Nordic winters. The character is out of place, it feels like the player is disturbing this world, and the terrifying creatures are there to remind of that, even though they do not harm the character. They merely act as a reminder that this is no place for a human to be.

Through the Woods.

Through the Woods is a game developed by the Norwegian company Antagonist (based in Oslo), and released in October 2016. It is a “third-person psychological horror game set in a forest on the western shore of Norway about a mother and her missing son. Through dynamic narration, you play the mother’s re-telling of the events surrounding her son’s disappearance in a setting heavily influenced by Norse mythology and Norwegian folk tales. With *Through the Woods*, the Norwegian Indie Studio, Antagonist, is attempting to capture the forest as

84 Therese Bane, *Myling in Encyclopedia of Spirits and Ghosts in World Mythology*, McFarland, 2016.

85 A game which focuses on exploring through walking, usually with little to no combat.

<https://www.gamespot.com/forums/games-discussion-1000000/what-exactly-is-a-walking-simulator-to-you-and-how-33374245/>

they saw it as children, with all the frightening and mysterious feelings of roaming the woods alone.”⁸⁶ The developers of *Through the Woods* intended to bring Norway into their creation: “...we spent a lot of time trying to make the game look and feel unique, in a Norwegian way”.⁸⁷ I finished the game in about five hours, which makes it relatively short, similarly to the others. The possibility to have the game entirely in Norwegian (both text and voice) was a good addition, as it helps getting into the game and understand that the game is meant to be Norwegian. The game begins at a cabin, near a lake, in a dense forest, with the toilets outside (as it should be?), a setting that is familiar throughout the Nordic region.

Within the game, there are both Vikings and Norse elements early on. Yet the first area of the game is set in the contemporary world: the mother, Karen, has a car, she explains that she retreated to the cabin in the woods to work, and the cabin has modern furniture and features.⁸⁸ The only warning she issues her son, Espen, is not to get too close to the pier by the lake, as it is old and unsafe. Even in this first scene, the atmosphere is already oppressive: the forest is not particularly inviting with its oppressive silence, a crow caws as Espen walks around, the water of the lake is dark and unnerving, even the house in the trees is eerie, with scattered notes and unusual objects. It is a contrast to the first scene of the area, where the lake is blue, the trees are green and the sun shines.⁸⁹ The player starts by playing Espen exploring the surroundings of the cabin, but only for about a day; then the player switches to playing the mother, Karen. The day after arriving at the cabin, she is looking for Espen and rushes to the pier, where she sees the boy taking off on a barge with a stranger. Despite her warnings and screams, they disappear into a fog, and she follows them swimming into the lake. Shortly after, she find herself swimming through the same fog, and to the other side, where the barge has disappeared and the environment already looks different.⁹⁰

As we progress through the new area, the buildings appear Viking in style, all of them empty, and some of them completely in ruin. It is a stark contrast with the modern cabin the player just left, but the landscape is not that different. Karen begins to wonder where she ended up, and if this is the same world she comes from; already, she has a

⁸⁶ <http://www.anticipations.no/throughthewoods/>

⁸⁷ See appendix L.

⁸⁸ See illustration n°14.

⁸⁹ See illustration n°13.

⁹⁰ <http://anticipations.no/2016/05/what-is-through-the-woods/>

suspicion that this might be another world entirely. In time, Karen encounters the first proof that this is, indeed, a different world: a big troll walking through the woods. From then on, throughout the game, the enemies will be adapted from Norse mythology and Norwegian folk tales. Their function in the game are also inspired from the myths, though serve a different purpose in-game. For example, Huldra, in Norwegian folklore, is a mystical forest creature that belongs to the “hidden folks” group, not unlike trolls. In the myths, Huldra is a seductive female creature who tempt men into marrying her to be rid of her Huldra attributes (a cow tail in Norwegian folklore). Generally, they become good wives and are benevolent and portrayed as harmless; in the game however, the Huldra hides in the shadows and follows the main character through a zone while screeching gloomily, then attacks if the player does not shine a light on her. The world looks like modern-day Norway, but these creatures and details remind the player that we are somewhere else. The encounter with Hatí and Sköll shows that rather well: the two wolves talk together in another language than the video game setting (most likely Icelandic, but based on Old Norse), and later to the main character, but first one of them says: “I know a little of her tongue. Let me speak.”. The wolf then speaks Norwegian or English, depending on the language chosen for the game.

In the end, the player discovers that the villain, Old Erik, was in fact attending to his duty to save his and the “real” world, but appeasing the beast Fenrir with children sacrifices; the player also find out that Espen followed Old Erik willingly, and sacrificed himself knowingly. There is definitely a strong connection between mythology and the real world in this game: Espen’s sacrifice does not only save the “Viking” world, it also saves the “real” world. Old Erik came through a portal from the Viking world to the “real” world, which implies that the two worlds were not connected before that, but coexisted on different planes.

There was no happy ending at the end of the game, no last minute plot-twist to turn the story around into a happy tale of a mother-son reunion. Instead, it followed what was set at the very beginning of the game. The character of the mother slides from un-caring parent to villain, as she decides to replace Old Erik in his task of feeding the mythological monster Fenrir with children from the “real” world. Karen takes on the burden from Old Erik to save both worlds from the wrath of Fenrir, not dwelling on the loss of her child, but by being a part of something bigger than herself; in a sense, she becomes less selfish after losing Espen than she was while he was alive.

2.2: Interviews.

As mentioned previously in the methodology section, interviews were sent out to various actors within the video game and nation branding communities. Out of 6 interviews sent out, only one person responded. The original interview can be found in the appendices, as appendix L. Below is a transcription of the interview with Stian M. Willums, Character Artist and Co-Founder of Antagonist, about their game *Through the Woods*.

Stian M. Willums did not hold back to answer my questions about the game. The first question concerned the use of Norse mythology in the game, and why this choice. Willums believes that Norse mythology and Scandinavian folklore hold an important position within Scandinavian societies. He and the rest of the team grew up with myths and stories and are able to physically experience them through their environment. A game then becomes the catalyst to these Norwegians' will to re-create their own version of this fantastical universe they know and cherish. When asked about his inspiration, Willums explains that he did extensive research on Norse mythology and Norwegian over a long time. Folktales, myths but also everyday objects and paintings inspired him to create the story of *Through the Woods*. He cites Theodor Kittelsen, Lars Hertevig and Wardruna as great references for his work. The villain of *Through the Woods* was based on an old folktale very popular among the previous generations of Norwegians living on the West coast, and the story of the game itself is creatively based on the aftermath of Ragnarök. Willums adds that he did research about the Old Norse language, a feature that was included in the game and that, he says, will be useful for future games as well.

The following question asked how much of the game was the team's imagination and how much was directly taken from mythology. Willums answered that characters in the game were heavily inspired by mythology, and he and his team tried to tie most aspects of the game to it. He is realistic about the sources (the Eddas for example) and the myths themselves, established long after Viking times: myths have been told, re-told and altered over centuries of oral tradition, cultural and local traditions. In his opinion, creating a game based solely on what is known about Norse mythology would "become rather difficult and strange without any deviations." To the question of having previous knowledge of Norse mythology before developing the game or was the research done on the go, Willums says that it was a bit of both – each member of the team had certain knowledge when they started,

at different levels. They did a lot of research and look for the extra original pieces that would make their game special and more original. They all learned more than they used, but also had to fill in the blanks for the game and story, since there is a more modern aspect of Scandinavian culture to the game as well.

Did they try to show a certain image of Norway through their game? Willums and the team stand by their presentation of the game on Antagonist.no: “With Through the Woods, the Norwegian indie studio, Antagonist, is attempting to capture the forest as they saw it as children, with all the frightening and mysterious feelings of roaming the woods alone.”⁹¹ He adds that they spent a lot of time to try and make the game look and feel unique and Norwegian through art and design. The attention to detail of the Viking villagers, terrified of their environment and resorting to survival instincts is used to make that environment even more unnerving: if the stereotypical “big bad Vikings” are afraid, what about the rest of us commoners? Willums explains that in the future, they want to show more of the other Vikings sides and portray them more closely to what we historically know about them as farmers, explorers and traders.

Due to insufficient interviews, I turned to player’s reviews about the four games presented in this study. Even if they do not have the professional touch that developers could have brought to this study, they offer an insight from the public’s point of view about these games reception, perception and observation. There are hundreds of players’ reviews on the game platform Steam, where the selected ones were picked out, but I tried to narrow it down by looking for keywords and concepts that were relevant to this study. The reviews are available in the appendices in the form of screenshots.⁹²

⁹¹ <http://www.antagonist.no/throughthewoods/>

⁹² See appendices A through G.

CHAPTER 3: The Nordic image: external VS domestic.

3.1: The Nordic image.

Before the June 8th 793 attack on Lindisfarne by Vikings, “the North” was depicted by other civilizations in various, sometimes ambiguous lights. After this first Viking raid, the image of “the North” changed drastically, and the thought of barbarian Vikings took hold to continue to this day. What is “the North” for the purpose of this study? By who is it depicted, and when? How? Historian Peter Stadius explains that “the North” can be seen through different dimensions. The first one, the spatial dimension, relates to where the image comes from, and where it focuses on. “The North” then means different things to different people: what is “the North” for a South American, and what is it for a European? The second one, the temporal dimension, lets us look at how a certain region has been portrayed throughout history, with all the changes that it pertains.⁹³ With these concepts in mind, the “Nordic image” takes us back all the way to Antiquity, and through numerous descriptions of “the North”. In “North/South”, Astrid Arndt explains that: “The dualism of North and South is one of the most long-standing distinctions in European cultural history.”⁹⁴

It goes back to Greek mythology, where an ambivalent image of “the North” described it as both a Greek paradise and a cold, frightening region. She goes on to explain that, due to the Greek’s ethnocentrism, anything that was not Greek would have been described as “barbarian” - a term that became popular to describe Vikings, and that has been a recurring term throughout history. For Stadius, the Classical period and Tacitus’ *Germania* largely contributed to the description of Northern tribes (at the time German tribes), and to the image that would entail until as late as the 18th century. What Tacitus’ *Germania* also teaches us is that the description of other civilizations and cultures are done from the writer’s point of view, and in opposition or affirmation of their perspective on their own point of

93 Peter Stadius, *Southern Perspectives on the North: Legends, Stereotypes, Images and Models*, The Baltic Sea Area Studies: Northern Dimension of Europe, Working Papers edited by Bernd Henningsen, vol. 3, Gdansk-Berlin 2001, page 1.

94 Astrid Arndt, “North/South”, in Beller & Leerssen (eds.), *Imagology*, p. 387.

origin. When Tacitus describes all the good of the German tribes, he is using their “otherness” to point at the flaws of the Roman society.⁹⁵

According to Stadius, this is one of four periods that define the Nordic image throughout history. For the purpose of this study, I would like to add accounts of the North during an intermediate period, the Viking era. In medieval accounts, “the North” is mostly referred to as a cold, inhospitable place. With the account from the religious men of Lindisfarne, the Vikings also gained the reputation of being ruthless, violent pillagers. There had been Viking raids in England before, but because they raided a monastery, in a region unprepared for such events, the then religious Europe, and especially England, defined the “northerners” as heathens and pagans for centuries after the deed had been done: “Now that I am away your tragic sufferings daily bring me sorrow, since the pagans have desecrated God's sanctuary, shed the blood of saints around the altar, laid waste the house of our hope and trampled the bodies of the saints like dung in the street. I can only cry from my heart before Christ's altar: "O Lord, spare thy people and do not give the Gentiles thine inheritance, lest the heathen say, 'Where is the God of the Christians?'”⁹⁶

Yet, in Alcuin’s account, there are also questions and reflections on the possible behaviors that might have led to such an event, suggesting that, even though he was saddened by what happened in Lindisfarne, he might also have been criticizing the monastery, and perhaps by extension, the Church: “What assurance can the churches of Britain have, if Saint Cuthbert and so great a company of saints do not defend their own? Is this the beginning of the great suffering, or the outcome of the sins of those who live there? It has not happened by chance, but is the sign of some great guilt.”

On the other hand, the largest amount of written sources on the Vikings during the 9th and 10th centuries is in Arabic, and depicts the Vikings as traders, rather than fighters and pillagers. Ahmad Ibn Fadlan, an Arabic writer who wrote lengthy accounts of his encounters with the “Rus” (Vikings), is both impressed by their appearance and repelled by their hygiene, and gives a general description of the Rus’ culture.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Stadius, *Southern Perspectives on the North*, page 3.

⁹⁶ Alcuin, *Letter to Highbald*, 793.

⁹⁷ Thorir Jonsson Hraundal, *The Rus in Arabic Sources: Cultural Contacts and Identity*, Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Bergen, February 2013, pages 92-102

The Renaissance contributed to rediscover ancient Greek and Roman texts, and with them, the positive and negative descriptions of the North. At this time, another major player entered the court: Protestantism. As Stadius mentions, “...*from a more general European perspective the North was to become the symbol of Protestantism during the 17th century and the Thirty Years’ War.*”⁹⁸ Accounts from Spanish authors and intellectuals about the Swedish king Gustav II Adolf were numerous and mythological in aspect; the king gained a plethora of nicknames and descriptions, which later also trickled to the Swedish warriors. The North was not only depicted negatively, as there was a certain admiration and respect, for example as opposed to the decadence of the Roman legacy. The North-South dichotomy was still very much alive, however, with the North portrayed as less civilized than the South.

The turning point came during the Age of Enlightenment (18th century), when the effective center of Europe shifted from Southern regions to a more Western and Northern axe (Stadius mentions “France, the German areas, the Low Countries and England”)⁹⁹. Montesquieu’s influence certainly played a role in the North-South image shift, as his theories on climate and regional character gained momentum in the mid-18th century. Montesquieu argues that climates has an influence on people’s character, and cites the North as more level-headed and cool than Southern regions, which are in turn vilified. The North shift from uncivilized to hard-working, independent and resilient. The South became emotional, the North rational (17).

There was already an underlying romanticism to descriptions of the North, but the Romantic period really took hold in the 19th century, and the North and Northernness were revived principally because of this movement. The movement was quite different from the Enlightenment, which, even though it slightly romanticized the North, was more about the science of the time and intellectual theories. Romanticism was more organic, more interested in the “little people” than the aristocrats, more about sensibilities and emotions. (17-18). During this time, Scandinavia was portrayed as the “untouched” North, with its people depicted as morally superior and full of dignity, albeit peasant-like more than aristocratic; Stadius uses the term “noble savage” (19). This period set the tone for many romanticized

⁹⁸ Stadius, *Southern Perspectives on the North*, page 11.

⁹⁹ Stadius, *Southern Perspectives on the North*, page 15.

accounts of the North in the following decades, and possibly lead -with the help of racial theories in the early 20th century- to the Aryan image propagated by Hitler.

At the start of the 20th century, with the industrial revolution and the early rise of capitalism, the North-South dichotomy took another turn: modernity versus traditions. The North often stood for modernity, and became a symbol for those who wanted to restructure their societies. At the same time, a more traditionalist discourse viewed the North as barbaric and uncivilized, remnants of classical times (20).

During the interwar period, positive images of the North reemerged as Europe was getting back on its feet – seemingly the Nordic countries had escaped the economic crisis, political tensions and social unrest that had submerged the rest of Europe. This miraculous region of “happy democracies” peaked in the late 1930s.¹⁰⁰ The previous depictions of the Nordic countries as harsh lands were contested during this time, replaced traveler accounts of social prowess, intelligence and reason (245). This image did not differ too much after the Second World War, when the Nordic countries began to be seen as a unified block of countries, facing adversities and still coming out on top. Social advances and the Nordic model of welfare are still praised, usually in opposition to a national model. The region is seen as wealthy, rational, on top of the social game, where wealth is evenly distributed and genders are equal by some¹⁰¹, but crippled by taxes, with no sexual morality, heavy bureaucracy and in denial of their problems¹⁰² by others. How does the Nordic region portray itself? Is there an effort in branding it, and does it match the external image that other countries have of them?

Efforts by the Nordic nations to brand themselves goes back to at least the early quarter of the 20th century. During the 1918-1945 period, both Finland and Norway had gained their political independence and began to seek recognition as nation-states on the international platform. The opinion of larger nation-states and the international community was key, and through formal and more informal means, the goal of the Nordic countries was to make their mark and present themselves as ideal nations. Culture was the forefront of the

¹⁰⁰ Peter Stadius, *Happy Countries* in Jonas Harvard & Peter Stadius, *Communicating the North: Media Structures and Images in the Making of the Nordic Region*, page 242.

¹⁰¹ https://www.huffingtonpost.com/soren-petersen/the-nordic-model---a-life_b_11817538.html

¹⁰² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/27/scandinavian-miracle-brutal-truth-denmark-norway-sweden>

effort, with representing of the nation mainly in the hands of diplomats, intellectuals and writers.¹⁰³ From the end of the 19th century on, the Nordic countries were already seen as democratic and free countries, for example because of the fact that women were free and active in society.

During the after war period (1945-1989), it became increasingly important for the Nordic nations to be able to “be” more, by influencing perceptions of their nations. The previous unorganized practices born under national enthusiasm became self-reflective and structured. Cooperation remained an important basis in the contest of self-promotion. The concept of Nordic model of welfare emerged during this time as well, centralizing activities under the state’s influence to encourage and increase the cooperation between public and private sectors. Trade and orientation towards technology became a more focal point within the branding of the Nordic nations. (15) As Nordic welfare states were being built, so began the attention conferred to the countries images. The Nordic states have a bond between them that also extends to the branding of the region; the practice of grouping the countries together was already part of Scandinavianism movement.¹⁰⁴

From 1990, things changed geopolitically for the Nordic countries. Denmark joined the EU first, followed by Finland and Sweden in 1995, but Norway and Iceland remained freestanding; the united image that was until then projected to the outside world was no longer self-evident. A collective brand of the Nordic region was launched, and culture and diplomacy became second to the promotion of trade, investments and exports.¹⁰⁵ Nordic cooperation, until then a background formality, became central to the branding of the Nordic region. Sometimes compared to siblings, the Nordic countries work together to create a common image to the Nordic region, while guaranteeing each country’s individuality. Until quite late, the Nordic countries did not have a coherent image abroad; contradicting messages were circulating, and inconsistency was not beneficial to the region. In the case of

¹⁰³ Louis Clerc, Nikolas Glover & Paul Jordan, *Histories of Public Diplomacy and Nation Branding in the Nordic and Baltic Countries*, page 13.

¹⁰⁴ Jonas Harvard & Magdalena Hillström, *Media Scandinavianism: Media vents and the Historical Legacy of Pan-Scandinavianism*, in Peter Stadius, *Communicating the North: Media Structures and Images in the Making of the Nordic Region*.

¹⁰⁵ Louis Clerc, *Histories of Public Diplomacy*, page 16.

Iceland, the government decided to start a promotional campaign in 2000 to increase awareness of Iceland with the Iceland Naturally program. The program, combining government and private sector efforts, manage to create interest in Iceland as a tourist destination for US citizens by promoting its outdoor activities, purity, and unspoiled environment.¹⁰⁶ 17 years later, Brand Finance ranked Iceland as the “best performing nation brand in the world”, with its brand value increasing 83% in 2016.¹⁰⁷

3.2: Foreign games narrative.

Two of the four video games in this study were developed outside of the Nordic countries. The interest of studying two games from outside the Nordic region alongside two games from the Nordic region is that their narratives might be different. Whether in their use of Norse mythology or their representation of the Nordic region, what stands out from this games can teach us something about the cultures and images of the Nordic region abroad, and about how nation branding efforts are received outside of the region.

3.2.1: Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice.

In the beginning of Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice, the main character, Senua -a Celtic female- is rowing a tree trunk towards Hellheim, in the mist. As the mist clears out a little when going forward, carcasses of Viking ships appear along the way and Senua’s voices warn her of danger. Hanging bodies punctuate the way to Helheim. The off-voice tells that Senua is “descending into darkness” and that “There will be no stories after this one”. The tone is set: “The dead here do not always stay still”, “This is not a place of rest”... The rest of the game is going to be rather gloomy, with corpses paving the way to the final realm of Helheim.

¹⁰⁶ Keith Dinnie, *Nation Branding: Concepts, Issues, Practice*, page 185.

¹⁰⁷ Businss Insider Nordic, <http://nordic.businessinsider.com/iceland-is-the-best-performing-brand-in-the-world-2017-10/>

Throughout the game, forests are abundant, and their flora matches that found throughout Scandinavia and Finland, such as birch, aspen, spruce and shrub. It is important to know that the creative team behind Hellblade took real-life images and locations to build their world, and transferred them directly into the game, to then mold them to create the game's environment.¹⁰⁸

These forests are not alluring however, and do not invite the player to stick around for too long: when it is not the nature that is oppressing, monsters and illusions abound¹⁰⁹. The shores, discovered quite soon after the start of the game, are not very inviting either: abrupt cliffs and rocks looking over a grey sea marked with Viking boats wrecks, it is dubbed "The Sea of Knives" in the game, from the broken masts sticking out of the water.¹¹⁰ The contrast with real-world advertisement of Nordic nature, sceneries and hiking capabilities is telling: in the introduction video of "Hiking in Norway" on *visitnorway.com*, a group of hikers first get together for a nice cup of hot beverage and sandwiches, before being taken by boat to climb up the Besseggen ridge, in the Jotunheim area (a name directly taken from Norse mythology¹¹¹), seemingly without too much effort ("After a long winter, people of all age groups and social backgrounds head outdoors and go trekking in the mountains..."), and to ultimately be surrounded by beautiful landscapes, pristine blue water and inviting green forests below ("And you are more than welcome to join us in our unashamed love affair with nature.").¹¹² Love of nature is a strong feeling in Norway, and something that has been put forward in the governments¹¹³ and in nation branding as well. The term "friluftsliv" ("open-air living"), coined in the 1850s by famous Norwegian playwright and poet Henrik Ibsen, expresses the value of connecting with nature, spending time in -preferably remote- locations for one's wellbeing.¹¹⁴ *Visitsweden.com*'s pages are more down-to-Earth when presenting Swedes' love for nature and hiking, but "friluftsliv" is nowadays as important a concept in Sweden as it is in Norway, and is included in research and statistics of the

¹⁰⁸ <http://www.hellblade.com/development-diary-4-creating-the-world/>

¹⁰⁹ See illustration n°5.

¹¹⁰ See illustration n°6.

¹¹¹ <http://www.ancientpages.com/2015/10/20/realms-jotunheimr-home-fearful-giants-norse-mythology/>

¹¹² <https://www.visitnorway.com/things-to-do/great-outdoors/hiking/>

¹¹³ Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Norwegians and Nature*, 1996. <http://hyllanderiksen.net/Nature.html>

¹¹⁴ <http://www.bbc.com/capital/story/20171211-friluftsliv-the-nordic-concept-of-getting-outdoors>

Folkhälsomyndigheten.¹¹⁵ The *visitsweden.com* video on nature presents an idealized Sweden, with residents who love nature and spend a lot of time with it, and specifically came to Sweden to do so.¹¹⁶ All of this largely contrasts with the tone of *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, which Tameem Antoniades, *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* team leader describes as: "...hugely oppressive, massive in scale, and something that feels daunting to the player as you approach and explore it."¹¹⁷

Senua's first encounter with enemies does not come right away in the game. The game first puts the player "in the mood", with Senua's voices predicting the worst, and the landscapes surrounding her announcing a tragic destiny; in this regard, it is surprising that Senua is not even armed. She later picks up a sword to fight a Viking-looking enemy¹¹⁸, which could be part of her imagination, or real, it is not certain. The first enemy wears a large skull to cover its face, and feathers on the back of its head, what appears to be linen pants and leather boots, and a leather/fur skirt covering its hips and upper thighs. It is not a classic, historical depiction of the Scandinavian or Sámi shamans, as I have not able to find evidence of them portrayed wearing or using animal skulls in their garments, and in the sense that the game's character is a fighter. The skull and feathers are, however, quite often portrayed when depicting Native American shamans, and are the most recurrent shamanic elements in these depictions. To find similar depictions in the Nordic region, I turned to the conceptual work of photographer Jukka Alasaari, a Finnish photographer that worked on a project to tell "the story of a tribal shaman making a long journey through uncharted woodlands".¹¹⁹ The particular importance of location in his work is also interesting. Other enemies later in the game have different looks, one of them rather "barbarian"¹²⁰¹²¹: an unsettling mask hiding its face, bare chest, unkempt hair and two-handed axe. In fiction,

115 <https://www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se/livsvillkor-levnadsvanor/friluftsliv/>

116 Visit Sweden, *Get Away*. <https://youtu.be/vxkT83Tx0Bw>

117 Ninja Theory, *Hellblade Development Diary 4: Creating the World*, October 13th 2014.

<http://www.hellblade.com/development-diary-4-creating-the-world/>

¹¹⁸ See illustration n°1.

119 <http://alasaari.com/conceptual-project-the-tribal-shaman/>

120 A person in a savage, primitive state; uncivilized person. Source:

<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/barbarian>

¹²¹ See illustration n°3.

Vikings are often depicted as strong, unkempt warriors. All enemies, excluding bosses, are called “the Northmen” in the game, and you cannot see their faces. The enemies are voluntarily mysterious, as Senua suffers from both visual and auditory hallucinations. This supports the stereotypes of the North and “Northmen”, mentioned in the first part of this chapter: Northmen are strong, tall, and somehow terrifying, both in history and in the game.¹²²

However, that does not stop Senua from pushing forward. As a female Celtic protagonist who sets on a journey against daunting forces, it is hard not to draw a parallel with real-life Queen Boudicca, who raised forces against the occupation of the Roman Empire circa 60 AD.¹²³ Even though Senua is not Nordic, she fits into the strong, resilient, empowered female narrative cherished by the Nordic countries. The Nordic countries have a strong image of feminism and gender equality abroad, and are often praised for it; at home, they cultivate this image as well. In Sweden, the government makes a strong case about having “the first feminist government in the world”¹²⁴; Iceland often ranked first in terms of gender equality, and has been dubbed the “best place in the world to be female”¹²⁵ on multiple occasions. In the game, Senua sets on her journey alone, after fighting for her very own existence: crippled by “the darkness”, a sort of curse she inherited from her mother, Senua was hidden away by her father, after her mother allegedly took her own life. But Senua wanted more from life, which is how she came to meet Dillion, the man she goes to the end of Viking hell to save. During the course of the game, Senua battles not only her psychosis, but faces the truth about her mother, father and herself. Her father, a religious zealot who, later in the game is found out to have led the village against Senua’s mother, could very well represent the patriarchy in a radical way.

Runes are ever-present within the game, mostly on stones called lorestones, that represent Senua’s friend Druth, and his teaching of the Northmen to accompany her journey. Collecting the runes brings an understanding about Viking lore and Norse mythology, as well as an alternative ending if all lorestones are collected. The game

122 Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson, Daniel Chartier, *Iceland and Images of the North*, pages 11-12.

123 http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/boudicca.shtml

124 Government Offices of Sweden, <http://www.government.se/government-policy/a-feminist-government/>

125 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/05/iceland-female-women-equal-pay-gender-equality>

developers did not use arbitrary runes; the circle of runes to collect has been translated by players online, and the message is said to read: “See Hela’s Truth In Mirror – Gods Betray Us – Unmask Fear”. Hela, the last boss, is also covered in runes. Runes play another role in the game, in the form of illusions that need to be matched to the environment Senua is in, in order to unlock the next path. Runes worked as letters for Germanic tribes in the past, but they had much more significance than simply an alphabet. Each rune symbolized a principle, or power associated to a force for which it stood; their names hint at their signification, and their magical and philosophical powers. The word “rune” itself means both letter and secret, which transpires through their use in this game. The runic alphabets have evolved over time and regions, which means interpretations can vary depending on the period and alphabet used to translate them. Rune stones and runes were an integral part of Viking life and traditions, and their significance is still being debated today. The fact that they are being used in this game is an interesting addition to the Viking and Norse atmosphere present in the game. As the Northmen are portrayed as blood-thirsty enemies, the runes play a role in reminding the player that they were not only warriors, but also highly spiritual. Religion is an important part of the game, with Senua’s father being a religious man who condemned his wife to death for taking away his child’s attention to the gods, and for herself not believing. Runes are a reminder of the importance of the gods for Vikings as well, and points to similarities between Senua’s father, a Celt willing to sacrifice his wife for the gods, to the Viking-like enemies of the game doing their gods’ bidding to stop Senua in her tracks.

The bosses in *Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice* mostly come from Norse mythology, as mentioned previously. The name Valravn, the first boss of the game, comes from Danish folklore and had been re-used in recent years to brand a Danish dark beer. The traditional Danish folk song depicting *valravne*¹²⁶ feasting on an infant’s heart was also reinterpreted by the folktronica band Sorten Muld and became a hit in 1997¹²⁷. Fenrir, the second boss in the game, was already a popular topic in Norwegian and Swedish poems in the 10th and 11th century. The wolf is raised, then bound by the gods, until Ragnarök, where he will break free and kill the All-Father, Odin. Norwegian sculptor Arne Vinje Gunnerud made a statue named

126 The plural of valravn in Danish.

127 Sorten Muld, *Ravnen*. <https://youtu.be/JBRukQ4d7zc>

Fenrisulven vil bryte seg løs, commissioned by KORO¹²⁸, and since relocated to Tokyo. Norse mythology keeps on being current and a source of inspiration in the Nordic countries, and it was for this game as well. Just like these artists were stimulated by Norse mythology, the art team of *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* explains that they went to a Viking exhibition in London for inspiration in the game. The everyday objects they saw at the exhibition were reworked as unique items in the game, the culture and beliefs encouraged them to create the atmosphere, characters and costumes. The team went through different stages of character development to come up with the final costumes we see in the game; these costumes were inspired by Viking-wear, but some were also re-imagined and amplified into more “crazy monsters”.¹²⁹ The term “monster” is interesting, as monsters are demonstrative to the cultural or psychological characteristics that are difficult to acknowledge as a society. To the Celts in *Hellblade*, Northmen are ruthlessness creatures that sacrifice to their malevolent gods; as we find out at the end of the game, however, these depictions match pretty closely what happened within the Pict village of Senua, where her mother was sacrificed due to her father's religious ideologies, while her village was betrayed by a merciless figure in black, leading to its destruction. Senua herself is described as different, therefore dangerous, hinting at the connection between the monsters she faces and her own reality. The “monsters” of *Hellblade* are quite telling to the moral challenges faced by Senua in the game, but also to the reality of a darker side to the appraised Nordic region: thought the Viking period is far back in time, crime and wrongdoings are very much present.

In a sense, the game is a window to Viking history, and how they were portrayed by Christian writers after the Viking era. It plays on stereotypes of the North and Northmen to entertain the player, but does not really offer much insight into Nordic societies, or even the Viking age. It showcases Norse mythology rather well however, and engages the player to learn more about the lesser-known creatures that are not used in other games. It also depicts Norse mythology in a more gruesome way, which is a side of the myth that is not often shown.¹³⁰ A parallel can be made between the monsters in the game, and the violence present

128 Kunst i Offentlige Rom, ”Art in Public Spaces”. <https://koro.no>

129 Ninja Theory, *Hellblade Development Diary 2: Art Inspiration*, September 1st 2014.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ysfmiN-aSs&index=2&list=PLbpbkF8TRYizaT6GfMcKBG-RoUOQ6BJRXp>

¹³⁰ See appendix C.

in the Nordic societies' underbelly: both represent moral challenges that play a role in the depiction of the region.

3.2.2: Jotun.

In Jotun, the player controls Thora, a female Viking who lost her life and her crew at sea. The gods are giving her a chance at redemption by exploring 9 worlds and defeating powerful enemies and ultimately, Odin. Thora, like Senua in Hellblade, represents a resilient woman; unafraid and ready to prove herself. As has been discussed previously, the image of the Nordic female is that of a strong woman, fighting for equality. According to Feministisk Initiativ (Fi), their goal is “Feminism for everyone”¹³¹, an image cherished by the Nordic region, despite heavy criticism from countries with different models, or where feminism is not as widespread. Sometimes, Nordic feminism is associated with the negatively connoted word “feminazi”, a pejorative term coined in the US to describe feminists committed to their cause.¹³² Sweden in particular has been under scrutiny due to the rise in recent years of the feminist party. The game's North American origin does not mean there is such dichotomy in Jotun however, as Thora is presented as her own person, with no male protagonist to compare to: she is a Viking chieftain, on her way to prove her worth to the All-Father, Odin. But Thora, wielding her two-handed axe to fight her enemies, still supports this vision of a strong Nordic female.

The game is based entirely on Norse mythology, and the landscapes of the game are a big indicator of the image of the Nordic countries abroad. The first world in Jotun is a green plain surrounded by trees, with a large tree in the background¹³³, Yggdrasil. Thora says she wakes up in “a place of stillness and silence”, a theme recurrent in all the games in this study. The Nordic countries are seen as serene and quiet places, which can conceivably be linked to the importance of nature in Nordic life; the insistence on their love of nature has

¹³¹ <https://feministisktinitiativ.se/sprak/english/>

¹³² A committed feminist or strong-willed woman. Pejorative term coined by American talk-show host Rush Limbaugh. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminazi>

¹³³ See illustration n°7.

been covered in the previous games, and Jotun, although entirely based in Norse mythology, is no exception in that regard. Jotun depicts the idea of the forest on multiple levels: in the first world, the plain is surrounded by a forest that grows roots onto the player's path, making it difficult to proceed. Later, in the level the Roots of Yggdrasil, the tree and roots are set in a menacing environment, where the ceiling collapses onto the player and roots are now pathways to platforms. In Vethrfofnir's Roost, the player is now climbing onto Yggdrasil itself, lush with leaves and wildlife. There are some direct interactions with nature (dodging an eagle, cutting roots and branches out of the way), but as with other games, it is mostly a setting to bring the story to life.

There is a lot of contrast in the worlds of Jotun; the adventure of Thora takes place in such different settings as a forge (Brokkr's Forge), an underground world (the roots of Yggdrasil), the tree of Yggdrasil itself (Vethrfofnir's Roost), an icy world (the Nine Rivers), a world in the clouds where electricity abounds (the Northern Sky), a lake (Jormungandr's lake) ... Through these various environments, Thora's explanations and points of interests, Thunder Lotus brings mythology to the player, even if said player had no previous experience with Norse mythology. The game was noticeably made for an audience outside of the Nordic region, who might not be familiar with the history of the area, but the landscapes of the game give a good insight as to the diversity of the Nordic region. For example, the Nine Rivers and Jormungandr's Lake, both by their names and their art design, could be located in any of the Nordic countries during the winter. The fact that blizzard was added also creates a sensation of cold associated with northern regions. Even though the game is meant to portray Norse mythology – and it does, it also potentially shows the landscapes that might have been at the origin of the myths themselves. The Northern Sky level, where the player can see and walk on the Northern lights, reminds the player of the Nordic region some more.

The enemies, the Jotun, which are bosses that Thora needs to defeat, also contribute to showing this diversity, with their elemental powers. Art director Jo-Annie Gauthier explains that they wanted the jotuns to be different from the gods, to connect to their realms.

¹³⁴ With this combination of known figures (Jormungandr, Odin) and lesser-known

¹³⁴ Jo-Annie Gauthier,

mythological beings (Vethrfofnir, jotuns...), Jotun stays true to scholarly knowledge of Norse mythology, and adapts it for a foreign audience that is used to a very different depiction of the myths (Marvel).

Jotun retains a little bit of this comic book character style, for example with Odin; first appearing wearing a long, dark robe, pointy hat, and a crow on each shoulder, when the combat phase begins he flips his cape on his back, and becomes a muscular, bearded, hero-looking god that would fit well in the Marvel universe. The end of the game additionally shows Valkyries surrounding Thora; the Valkyries, famous shield-maidens known to work for Odin to bring fallen combatants into Valhalla and fierce warrior of the realm of the Gods, are here portrayed differently from usual depictions. Holding a shield, sword and wearing a warrior helmet, they wear an ethereal white dress, their hair and a long ribbon flowing freely behind them; both warrior and feminine. Is this interpretation intentional, to contrast with Thora's more masculine attire? Perhaps the white color and the dress are used in distinction to the otherwise gruesome nature of the Valkyries? True to their duty, the Valkyries propel Thora through a beam of light to Valhalla – she has impressed the gods and earned her reward.

The story in Jotun is not as developed as in the other games in this study. The first cut scene explains how Thora died, and was sent to Ginnungagap, the purgatory where Odin gives her a chance to redeem herself to enter Valhalla. After that, the game is about the adventure (fighting jotuns), and exploration. Thora intervenes to give the player information about Norse mythology throughout the game, and a bit of backstory, but there is not quite enough to go on for a more extended analysis. Other players have had similar complaints; the art is well-done, and the Norse mythology is well presented, but the story lacks.¹³⁵ The Norse stories presented in the game are true to scholarly knowledge of the myths, and the interpretation is more so in the level design than in the story itself.¹³⁶

Jotun develops their vision of Norse mythology to attract and entertain the player; in numerous player's comments or reviews, it transpires that the concept functioned, as they want to know more about the myths; in turn, could they become interested in the countries

https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/255371/Art_Design_Deep_Dive_The_handdrawn_art_and_animation_of_Jotun.php

¹³⁵ See appendix B.

¹³⁶ See appendix A.

of origin of these myths? Is Jotun participating actively in branding the Nordic region? In certain ways, perhaps; Thora as a strong female warrior vehicles ideas of feminism and gender equality already in ancient times in the Nordic countries, the landscapes are visually interesting and attractive, and the game really draws attention to Norse mythology, a part of Nordic history. However, already being familiar with the Nordic region would benefit to appreciate the complexity of the images this game displays.

3.3: Nordic games narrative.

Through the Woods and Year Walk are both games that were developed in the Nordic countries (Norway and Sweden respectively). They are particularly interesting from a cultural point of view, and fit rather well within the nation branding aspect of this study, as they both attempt to define the roots of what makes Norway and Sweden “Nordic”. Though very different in terms of gameplay and stories, both have something to say about their origin country.

3.3.1: Year Walk.

The game begins with a text explanation on Årsgång, or year walking. After this brief introduction, the player is immersed into the game right away, in a snowy forest, looking at a wooden house. The trees look like birch trees, which are common in the Nordic countries, and the wooden house is typical of cottages found throughout the Nordic region.¹³⁷ Cultural and historical geographer Maja Lagerqvist enlightens us on the image of such cottages in Sweden and on the role of mass media in image and nation building.¹³⁸

Not only was the cottage important and an integral part of nation building and national image in post-war Sweden, it is an image deeply embedded in Nordic societies in general. The

¹³⁷ See illustration n°11.

¹³⁸ Maja Lagerqvist, *The importance of an old rural cottage: Media representation and the construction of a national idyll in post-war Sweden*, Journal of Rural Studies, Department of Human Geography, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden, 2014.

website *sweden.se* describes a “love affair” between Swedes and their summer house: about half of the population has access to one, and 600 000 exist in Sweden alone. The description on *sweden.se*’s website fits the cottage in Year Walk impeccably: “(...) *red-painted cottages in an endless pastoral landscape (...)*”¹³⁹. The fact that the game begins with the image of the cottage is telling about the image of Sweden it wants to project.

There is no music and no sound, until the player moves the character and the snow crunches under the protagonist’s feet. The game renders the stillness and quietness of Nordic winter remarkably and is rather immersive; to add to the immersion, the game is in first-person view, and the player does not get to see the character. The player becomes aware that the protagonist is a male named Daniel Svensson, which makes Year Walk the only game studied here that does not have a female protagonist. The character is not as important during the course of the game or for its development; since the game focuses on immersion, the player becomes the character, only to detach at the very end.

There are pre-defined paths to walk through during the game, so even though it is a walking simulator, it is not a free-exploration game. This means that instead of a 3D world the player can freely go through, it reminisces of the older 2D games where only a few pre-defined paths were to be followed to progress through the story. In Year Walk, certain paths only open up after you have done a certain action; previously, those paths would be unavailable to the player. Essentially, Year Walk is an interactive folktale.

What makes Year Walk different from the other games is that Norse mythology is only slightly present throughout the game. It is not obvious at first sight, one has to dig a little deeper. Even though Year Walk is based on Swedish folklore, rituals of connection with the unknown and vision of the future date back to Norse mythology and rituals. To perform Årsgång, people would fast and face hardships, to get a glimpse of the future, a form of forbidden knowledge. In Norse mythology, a similar event took place when Odin, in search of knowledge, fasted from food and drinks for several days, hung himself upside down and pierced his body with a spear in order to discover the runes. On a different occasion, Odin also sacrificed an eye to acquire knowledge from Mimir’s well. It is not clear how far back the ritual of Årsgång began, though Tommy Kuusela gives us a possible

139 *The Swedish summer house – a love affair*. <https://sweden.se/culture-traditions/the-swedish-summer-house-a-love-affair/>

timeframe: “He [Johan Johannis Törner] says that it is still known that during Christmas Eve, people use prognostication to look for omens of the future. In pre-Christian times, this was known as year walk (Törner 1946: 151).”¹⁴⁰ The long-forgotten tradition of Årsgång reimagined in the game interprets Sweden as a mysterious place, where the mystical is part of the everyday, and life is not exempt of crime. In recent years, the surge of crime literature from the Nordic countries, and Sweden in particular, has put the region in the spotlight once reserved almost exclusively to Anglo-Saxon countries. The *Millenium* trilogy facilitated Sweden’s access to the top, although crime series existed long before that. An integral part of Sweden today, it is difficult to remember what it was like before *Millenium*; indeed, there is now even a tour of the famous spots from the series organized in Stockholm.¹⁴¹ Crime series and novels abound, although the Nordic countries have a crime-free public image; yet, the image projected by Scandinavian noir is not impacting negatively on the countries. It makes sense, then, that crime found its way into video games as well, for example in *Year Walk*. The folklore ritual of Årsgång is said to end either with visions of the coming year, or the death of the person who takes part, if they fail to resist or confront the monsters they encounter. In the case of *Year Walk*, the protagonist does not die from the ritual, but is being executed for murder.

At the end of the game, a newspaper clip appears, telling about the execution of Daniel Svensson (the protagonist), in Kristianstad prison. The protagonist, in his Årsgång visions, killed his lover, Stina Nilsson, as he thought he was fighting a monster. The article mentions that the sentence was criticized by a renowned doctor, stating that the executed had trouble discerning past from present, and had visions of horrible creatures, “something not uncommon among schizophrenics”. The crime here is being explained, contextualized within the frame of mental illness. There is no mention of folklore or Årsgång.

The protagonist is said to suffer from a mental illness, schizophrenia; in *Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice*, the protagonist also suffers from a mental illness, though hers is psychosis. Both illnesses induce visions and hallucinations, which become part of the game, and in both cases

140 Tommy Kuusela, “*He Met His Own Funeral Procession*”: *The Year Walk Ritual in Swedish Folk Tradition*. Page 61.

141 Stieg Larsson and *Millenium*, <https://visitsweden.com/stieg-larsson-and-millennium/>

refer to folklore and mythical creatures. I will write in more detail about this in the comparison of Nordic and non-Nordic games' narratives.

A handwritten letter appears after the newspaper clip, urging the protagonist to “save her” – “her” being Stina Nilsson, the woman murdered by the protagonist. It is not clear who the letter is from: “You are long dead when I write this. And I have not yet been born. Yet we have a connection beyond life, death, space and time. The impossible made possible by year walking.” Here, it becomes unclear if year walking is still about divination only, or time travel alternate dimensions. This description sounds like it could come from the recent German series *Dark*, which tackles such issues with a dose of mysticism¹⁴². The last image in the game is a knife with the carved initials D.S. and the player is left wondering if this is the knife that was used to commit the murder.

The game *Year Walk* actively participates in the national image of Sweden in two ways: it draws from the emotional and affective way Swedes view their country, through depictions of the landscape, particularly the forest and cottage¹⁴³, but it also shows another, darker side which involves the mystique and crime. When it comes to nation branding, the idea is to portray a country in its best light, and hide or omit the darker sides as much as possible. But those within the culture, such as the developers of *Year Walk*, are articulating different opinions on the polished image Sweden is projecting abroad, and the game is a way of displaying a darker side that would perhaps not be seen otherwise.

3.3.2: Through the Woods.

The game begins with a lake view of Norwegian wilderness, then a plan of a wooden cabin and a wooden house nearby. A mother and son walk toward the cabin, then the son takes a different path and the player begins to control him, free to explore the cabin's surroundings. The sun shines, the birds chirp, there is a little breeze, but it is cold, as the characters are wearing heavy jackets. The mother and son are Karen and Espen, who came to spend a

¹⁴² Mike Hale, *Review: With “Dark”, Netflix Delivers Science Fiction With European Roots*, December 5th 2017, The New-York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/05/arts/television/review-with-dark-netflix-delivers-science-fiction-with-european-roots.html>

¹⁴³ See illustrations n°11 and 12.

weekend in the cottage for Karen to be able to work. The cabin is typically Norwegian, in the sense that Norwegian anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen explains: “Thousands of Norwegians spend weekends and holidays at the family cabin, which ideally speaking should be tucked away in the wilderness surrounded by the pristine landscape of the Norwegian mountains.”¹⁴⁴ The cabins and cottages are recurring images when portraying the Nordic countries, domestically or abroad. The importance of the cabin has been explained previously with Maja Lagerqvist’s analysis, and it holds true for Norway as well Sweden. The cabin in the game is a bit more modern than a traditional no-electricity, no-running water cabin, yet it is still tucked away from civilization and ideally situated near a lake, inside a forest. The idea of a cabin with so little comfort is not necessarily something that appeals to foreigners. When researching this game, I came across a playthrough¹⁴⁵; the player is located in the United States, and early in the video, he wonders about there being no bathroom in the cabin, for example, and about Karen’s character as well.¹⁴⁶

As the player begins to control Espen, the mother, Karen, warns him not to go to the pier, as it is old and dangerous. The player does need to go there to trigger the next part of the chapter: Karen calls out to Espen that she is preparing pizza for them to share. This might seem like an anecdotal thing, just a line in a game, and it probably is for players outside of the Nordic countries, or even outside of Norway. Nonetheless, in Norway, there is an ongoing joke that pizza is the country’s national dish. Following a survey in 2004 by Stabburet where almost 20% of the population responded that they think Grandiosa is one of Norway’s national dishes¹⁴⁷, and Grandiosa’s share of the market reaching almost half of all the pizzas consumed in Norway¹⁴⁸, it is a recurring joke that pizza is, indeed, Norway’s

¹⁴⁴ Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Norwegians and Nature*, 1996.

¹⁴⁵ The act, or a recording, of playing a game from start to finish. (Wiktionary).

<https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/playthrough>

¹⁴⁶ John Wolfe, *Through the Woods [Part 1] – NEW NORSE HORROR ADVENTURE*,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CnWUwCXkgk>

¹⁴⁷ Grandiosa, “I en undersøkelse Stabburet gjennomførte i 2004, svarte nesten 20 % av befolkningen at de mener Grandiosa er en av våre nasjonalretter.”, <http://www.grandiosa.no/Om-Grandiosa>

¹⁴⁸ Halvor Ripegut, Nordmenn har aldri spist mer frossenpizza enn i år, Nettavisen, 2017.

<https://www.nettavisen.no/na24/finans/nordmenn-har-aldri-spist-mer-frossenpizza-enn-i-ar/3423295028.html>

national dish (as of 2014, Fårikål was still Norway's specialty¹⁴⁹). Pizza Grandiosa is again mentioned in the game, on a post-it note in the cabin's kitchen.

As can be read in the interview with Stian M. Willums¹⁵⁰, the developers wanted a game that felt Norwegian, and they succeeded by adding little bits and pieces that reflect Norway well, such as the pizza detail mentioned previously. First of all, the game can be played with the original voices in Norwegian, allowing the player to be completely immersed, along with the location. It is also interesting that it was decided to have this feature at all, when the game could have been in English only, as a large part of the video game market utilizes English as a language. Then, of course, the folklore throughout the game, which is based on stories the developers knew growing up in Norway or researched for the purpose of the game. But also the characters themselves. Karen, the protagonist of the game, is not a typical game heroine. After only a few minutes in the game, Karen begins to tell her story: "I'm not going to pretend I was a great mother. When Espen was born, I found, to my surprise, I felt... nothing. My nightmare had come true and I was left raising a child I didn't love." This last statement in particular might be shocking to a lot of people; traditionally, a woman is seen as a caregiver, a mother, the essential element for the perpetuation of the species. In ancient pagan religions, the feminine was often associated with fertility, and vice-versa. Nordic societies have worked towards more gender equality, and are reputable for it, as well as for their strong feminist presence. People in general are also blunter and more honest about many things, and may have fewer taboos and restrictions than some other societies. The combination of these two things makes it so that it is not uncommon to hear talks about negative things, difficult things, things that others might not even consider talking about. A common thing being told to foreigner who come to the Nordic countries, when interacting with Nordic people, is to not ask "how are you"; either because it is too personal to answer¹⁵¹, or because they might give a very truthful answer. The fact that Karen is honest about the way she felt might seem inappropriate: in the game, she is telling the story of how her son went missing, and this is not a very common way of talking about a lost one. As a

¹⁴⁹ News in English, "*Fårikål*" wins again as Norway's national dish, June 16th 2014, <http://www.newsinenglish.no/2014/06/16/farikal-wins-again-as-norways-national-dish/>

¹⁵⁰ See appendix L.

¹⁵¹ Kristin Rygg, *Was Malinowski Norwegian? Norwegian Interpretations of Phatic Talk*, Journal of Intercultural Communication, 2016. <https://immi.se/intercultural/nr40/rygg.html>

non-Nordic myself, it was surprising to hear her say these words; but having spent a while in the Nordic countries, it did not seem out of character. It is just one of those things that make the game even more Norwegian. The surprise of Youtuber John Wolfe in his play-through is palpable: “Whaaat?”¹⁵²

As the game progresses, Espen is kidnapped, and Karen follows him and his kidnapper through a thick veil of mist across the lake. Karen finds herself in a very different area than she originally started from; at first, things do not look different: the forest is similar to the one around her cabin, the sun is shining but the surroundings are quite silent. But the game will gradually become scarier – strange marked stones glow in the dusk with depictions of monsters and while looking for her son, Karen will stumble upon various monsters from Nordic folklore and Norse mythology. There are no weapons in this game: the protagonist is only equipped with her flashlight and therefore has to avoid the most dangerous creatures, or she will die. The player is made to feel like they are only a guest in this mystical world, and that the rules of “our” world do not apply. It is interesting to draw a parallel between the game and real life; even though a flashlight could technically be enough to scare most of the wild creatures in real life, there still exist this inherent fear of forests, and of the dark. Many horror movies have forest settings, showing that despite a trend of going back to nature, such areas leave people feeling vulnerable, especially during the night.

In the case of Karen, however, she does not seem to be particularly scared; she has a goal in mind, finding her son, and even though her way is paved with dangerous creatures, she does not flinch and keeps moving forward. This will to keep going in the face of adversity is a recurring theme within the games of this study, but the character of Karen is different from Thora in *Jotun* or Senua in *Hellblade*. As a first impression, and again further in the game, Karen seems to be selfish; first because she speaks about not loving her son as a baby, then when she expresses her irritation towards Espen’s father suicide, and later when she makes a deal with murderous mythological wolves to let them free to roam and kill if they let her pass to find her son. Unlike the other two female protagonists, Karen does not draw much sympathy, and is not portrayed as a triumphant hero, more like a human, with human flaws and emotions.

¹⁵² John Wolfe, *Through the Woods [Part 1]*.

The monsters and enemies in the game act as if Karen is trespassing onto their world, and she also appears out of place. She sometimes pleads to be helped or spared, and does not seek them out to defeat them, but rather just passes by – similarly to Year Walk. Direct interactions are rare and usually end up harmfully. One example is when Karen catches up with Espen and Old Erik -the villain-, and Espen explains to his mother that he has chosen this fate, and was not kidnapped but is following Old Erik willingly. Karen attempts to fight Old Erik, who knocks her unconscious; she keeps following them after that, to save Espen in spite of his warning. This leads her to encounter Hatí and Sköll, two wolves from Norse mythology; in the myths, one chases the sun, the other chases the moon, to explain the cycle of days. In the game, she has to scare each wolf away with a different technique to access a locked door. She is cornered by the wolves, who convince her to open the door so that they would not be trapped any longer. By reading through the notes in the game, Karen knows that setting the wolves free means they will go on a killing rampage that might end the world – the half-eaten moon of the game’s world being a testament to their fierce nature. To progress through the game, the door has to be opened, so Karen accepts the bargain, in order to save Espen. Even though she has depicted Old Erik as a villain throughout the game, Karen is now sacrificing countless lives to save her son, who told her not to come after him.

Not too long after the wolves’ scene, Karen find herself into a marsh, where she is confronted by The Veiled Lady, the witch of the swamp who shows her memories. The player learns that Karen broke Espen’s arm when he was younger, because her temper got the best of her. As it strained her relationship, she asked for a divorce, but Espen’s father said he would take the child with him, as he did not trust her to raise him. She apparently lied to the court during custody hearing, that Espen’s father was a violent man threatening Karen’s and Espen’s safety, and sole custody was awarded to her – which is what may have led Espen’s father to suicide. This is the ultimate portrayal of Karen as a selfish person, added to her image of an “odd duck”, something that has been discussed by other countries and immigrants about Norway.¹⁵³¹⁵⁴ Once more, these topics that are not openly discussed in society but find a way to be heard through the game: selfishness, male suicide and custody

¹⁵³ Richard Orange, Swedish journo attacks “selfish” Norway, *The Local* (Norway), November 14th 2013.

<https://www.thelocal.no/2013/11/14/swedish-journo-slams-racist-selfish-norway>

¹⁵⁴ Nina Berglund, *Foreigners just don’t “get” Norway*, *News In English*, July 28th 2011.

<http://www.newsinenglish.no/2011/07/28/foreigners-just-dont-get-norway/>

laws in favor of mothers. This is not something that is exclusively Nordic, but it might be a way to show a darker side of the people's characters, pressure of gender roles, and how gender equality is not yet achieved, despite the countries' efforts.

Karen finally catches up to Old Erik and Espen, and notes along the way explain how Old Erik's son was the first child that was sacrificed to the wolf Fenrir; the son volunteered, so that Fenrir would leave the village alone. Since then, Old Erik had been perpetuating the ritual, one child sacrificed every five years. Espen is ready to jump into the wolf's maw, but Karen tries to stop him: "There are other children, it doesn't have to be you!". Espen jumps anyway, and as she tries to catch him, Karen falls, along with Old Erik. The next scene shows all three of them back at the pier near the cottage; Karen desperately tries to revive Espen, but to no avail. To honor her son's memory, Karen takes Old Erik's place in perpetuating the ritual.

The folklore and Norse mythology add character to this game, which is a good immersion into a Norwegian setting; the characters' personalities and the little details of the game bring out the Norwegian-ness the developers were going for.¹⁵⁵ The fact that the game is clearly set in Norway as well adds to the feeling of discovering what the country and the people are like, in a sense, as it takes the player through a video game version of someone's childhood memories and imagination from the stories they heard as children.¹⁵⁶ It contributes to show Norway in its rawest form, not only with an interesting history and folklore, but also this dark side of selfishness and individualism. The difference with other games is that *Through the Woods* takes the player to another level of interacting with their character - even if the game balances it out in the end, it is difficult to feel compassion for the protagonist, whereas the villain attracts more sympathy. Overall, by showing the darker sides of their country with the use of Norse mythology, *Antagonist* breaks the codes of usual nation branding, while actively participating in putting their country on the proverbial map.

¹⁵⁵ See appendix L.

¹⁵⁶ See appendix D.

3.4: Comparison: heroism or realism?

The analysis of all four games highlights the similarities and differences between them. Some elements are recurrent throughout all of them. If we take the example of forest, which are central in all four games of this study, we can see that they are a common denominator of the Nordic image. Forests were already important to Germanic people, according to Hilda Ellis Davidson, who explains that they have been known to worship their deities in open forest clearings.¹⁵⁷ Historically, forestry has also played a major role in the Nordic countries' economies, and the forest area per capita is higher than the rest of Europe, and than the world's average, in Sweden, Finland and Norway.¹⁵⁸ The importance of the forest, together on a social and economic level, could explain the fascination with Nordic forest areas, both abroad and within the region. Forests in the games are distinctive from each other; in *Year Walk*, the footsteps of the protagonist are muffled by the snow, and the forest is silent, as if there is no life in it. In *Through the Woods*, the forest is home to menacing monsters the protagonist has to avoid in order to continue; it is part of a series of obstacles. In *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, the forest is both an obstacle, a place transformed by illusions to confuse and disorient, and a showcase of the possible horrors that await. Finally, in *Jotun*, the forest is a backdrop to vitrine Norse mythology. As Nordic countries utilize nature and forests as nation branding tools, one could argue these games all took something from that and used it their way – though none of them in accord with the image of pristine nature attractive for tourists.

Stillness and cold are two other Nordic elements that are present in each one of the games, again differently. Snow is present in three of the four games, but all interpret cold in some way, either through landscapes and weather, or even through character. Karen and Old Erik in *Through the Woods* are good examples of seemingly cold people. As described before, the story of Karen insists on her selfishness and her willingness to come out on top that cost the life of her ex-husband. Old Erik, kidnapping children that force him to relive the worst moment of his life, and yet he continues on with his duty. As *Through the Woods* aims to be a Norwegian game, this could pose the question of character of Norwegian people,

¹⁵⁷ Hilda Ellis Davidson, *The Lost Beliefs of Northern Europe*, Routledge, 1993, page 69.

¹⁵⁸ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, <http://www.fao.org/home/en/>

presenting them and their country in a rather negative light. Snow is also present in *Through the Woods*, though only punctually during the game; the last area next to Fenrir's maw is covered in snow, indicating that the cold is not only in the weather, but in the upcoming situation. The snow in *Year Walk* is a vehicle for both cold and stillness, as it muffles the protagonist's footsteps and renders the surroundings inimical and bleak. *Visit Sweden*, *Visit Norway* and *Visit Finland* all assert that winter is a magical time in their country, where most of the focus goes to the Northern lights. *Visit Finland* offers outdoors activities as long as you "dress right"¹⁵⁹, *Visit Norway* says staying indoors in winter is a thing of the past¹⁶⁰, *Visit Sweden* explains how Swedes have learned to "thrive and survive"¹⁶¹ during the cold months. The snow here is not an obstacle, but rather an addition to the fun you'd have going to the Nordic region in the winter (and a great canvas to reflect those Northern lights). *Visit Denmark* is not as big on winter, though there are swimming festivals¹⁶², and *Inspired by Iceland* warns about the weather conditions as the roads can be blocked by snow and storm¹⁶³. Here we find a more nuanced appreciation of the snow: it can make your surroundings dangerous and it becomes an obstacle. On the other hand, all of these websites agree that winter in the Nordic region is long and dark.

Two of the games dealt with mental illness: *Hellblade* and *Year Walk*. In the first one, it is a central attribute of the main character, whereas in the second one, it is only suggested, but it is present nonetheless, suggesting that perhaps what the player sees through the protagonist's point of view is only illusion. As the games rely on folklore and Norse mythology, it is a nice *clin d'oeil* to the fluctuating nature of myths. Even though *Through the Woods* does not directly deal with mental illness, there are references to it: Karen's post-partum depression, Espen's father suicide, Espen's willingness to sacrifice himself and even Karen's lie. Mental illness and psychiatric disorders have become a concern in recent years, as many face discriminations when seeking professional help. In Nordic societies, the approach to mental illness is a bit different; there is an underlying

¹⁵⁹ Visit Finland, *Winter*. <http://www.visitfinland.com/winter/>

¹⁶⁰ Visit Norway, *Winter*. <https://www.visitnorway.com/plan-your-trip/seasons-climate/winter/>

¹⁶¹ Jonna Dagliden Hunt, *Long read: Shaped by winter*, Visit Sweden. <https://visitsweden.com/shaped-by-winter/>

¹⁶² Visit Denmark, <https://www.visitdenmark.com/search/global?keys=winter&ankr-q=winter>

¹⁶³ Inspired by Iceland <https://www.inspiredbyceland.com/search-results?q=winter>

tradition, linked to honesty, that means mental illness is perceived similarly to physical illness and does not generate as much stigma as in some other nations. On the contrary, it becomes part of diversity, and sometimes of the country's image. In the Danish-Swedish series *Bron/Broen* (The Bridge), Saga Norén possesses characteristics similar to autism, and her Danish work partner Martin, under his joyful expression, struggles at home; in the second season, he is spiraling downwards as he struggles with depression and paranoia, and between his morality and his willingness to kill the man that destroyed his family. Season 3 treats of mental instability in veterans, suicide and depression, while season 4 deals with anxiety and therapy. Aired in 100 countries, *Bron/Broen* shows that anyone can suffer from mental illness, and that it is not something to hide or sweep under the rug. Henning Mankell's character Wallander, who first appears in the novel *Mördare utan ansikte* (Faceless Killers), is the embodiment of a disillusioned man; an alcoholic with brusque manners who seems to pass through his own life, he is at some point in the series of books accused of police brutality, and lives with the guilt of having shot a man dead, which eventually leads him to depression.

In Finland, mental illness and psychiatric disorders have become part of the nation, and have highly contributed to the country's image. Famous comic novelist Arto Paasilinna has created incredible situations in his stories that deal with Finnish society's problems with a sarcastic and humorous tone. In *Hurmaava joukkoitsemurha*, the reader follows a bus full of people determined to commit suicide at a given date, but who decide to live their lives to the fullest beforehand. In *Suloinen myrkyneittäjä*, cruelty, suicide and murder are treated with humour. Recently, a punk rock band named Pertti Kurikan Nimipäivät (PKN) composed of Down Syndrome and autistic band members was chosen to represent the country in the 2015 Eurovision Song Contest. One of their songs was previously featured in the movie *Vähän Kunnioitusta* (2009), and a documentary called *The Punk Syndrome* was made about PKN. They contributed to raise awareness about their conditions and to put Finland on the map as a country who does not shy away from mental illness, disabilities and minorities.

The emancipated and strong Nordic female image echoes to the 19th century travelers' accounts on the Nordic countries about the free role of women in Nordic societies

as the symbol of modernity and progress.¹⁶⁴ Female protagonists in the games all hold this unyielding trait, though they are in essence very different. Senua in *Hellblade* is motivated by the loss of the one she loved, even though he rejected her, and in spite of her mental illness. She pushed through in more ways than one and is not depicted in the traditionalist sense of the woman breaking the codes of family life to pursue her own destiny. Senua's family was wiped out before the game even began, and she sets on this journey alone to fight her inner demons and set herself free of the horror that accompanied her childhood. She is not Nordic in the game, but she holds similar attributes. Thora is a Viking chieftain, something that has been discussed recently in light of archeological evidence. She holds the same attributes as Senua, minus the mental illness, and is fighting her way through death and shame to Viking paradise, Valhalla. The character of Karen in *Through the Woods* reverses the traditionalist's view of the woman breaking free from family obligations; she begins by being the opposite of a family woman, to, in the end, honor her son's memory by being the mother she should have been for him but could not be. Three different characters, but similar character traits: going forward in the face of adversity, leaving behind expectations and pursuing their goal.

While Nordic games focus on the dark side of their country of origin and societies, and utilizes Nordic folklore and Norse mythology to this effect, non-Nordic games tend to be more about the promotion of certain aspects of Norse mythology and not so much on societies and environments. Both non-Nordic games give out a strong image of Norse mythology, which is the center of the stories being told, and from which they create the personality of the characters. On the other hand, Nordic games emphasize their characters, their personalities, the environments they evolve in and the dark sides of their countries, while Norse mythology and Nordic folklore support these already existing "truths" about the Nordic region. The non-Nordic games, by utilizing known stereotypes and popular (sometimes less popular) Norse myths, create an interest in the Nordic region's history; the Nordic games are more efficient at being critical of the image of the region and is showing that branding a nation can also be done by showcasing its dark side.

¹⁶⁴ Peter Stadius, *Southern Perspectives on the North*, page 24.

Conclusion.

By attracting more and more players every year and raising their revenues, video games have gained a strong foothold in the entertainment business. Not yet at the same level as movies or series, they are steadily gaining recognition and becoming an essential hobby for almost half of the global population. They are forcing us to reconsider their position on the market, and their possible influence on society, a key factor in nation branding. It is difficult to establish how much of a role video games can have in nation branding, as it is not a tool that is being used currently. From a purely economic point of view, it might be beneficial to consider this high-revenue entertainment platform, but the preponderance of video games in a cultural context is what makes them an interesting mean to convey a national image, cultural and societal messages, as well as use them in a nation branding framework.

As it has been presented in this study, video games can have an influence on a nation's image, and be used in efforts to comfort a branding position, or dismantle it unwittingly. The virtual worlds created for a video game are often based on real-life locations and the stories can include real-life issues that are reflective of societal problems or characteristics. In the games presented in this study, cultural and regional differences have been uncovered when it comes to the image of the Nordic region and societies. The reactions of the players picked out also show that there is indeed an appreciation of what these games bring about the Nordic region and Norse mythology, for example the use of “original” language and the interpretation of Norse mythology in different environments.

The use of Norse mythology in the games presented in this study vary; the non-Nordic games studied tend to utilize Norse mythology to give an image of the Nordic countries with codes familiar to a foreign audience. By applying known stereotypes and ideas of the Nordic people and countries into their games, they succeed in creating an external brand that does not always correspond to the nations' efforts. The fact that “Northmen” are portrayed as combatants and rueful characters is an image that has survived through the ages, and is perpetuated via modern media, including video games – a branding older than the concept of nation branding itself. Other elements in the non-Nordic games suggest an external branding effort that partly corresponds to the branding efforts in the Nordic region, notably the recurrent use of forests and strong female characters. There are

some negative sides shown in the games as well, though mostly related to the Viking age and this part of Nordic culture, rather than a critic of the modern Nordic region. Cultural differences also mean that non-Nordic games focus on what is already known of Nordic culture through nation branding, and interpret it in their own way.

Nordic video games develop characters and stories close to the image they have of their region, and add Norse mythology and Nordic folklore to support these characters and personalities, rather than constructing from the mythology itself. In current branding techniques, Norse mythology is not popularly used, but in the imagined countries and imaged Nordic region, it is rather popular, which can explain its numerous interpretations in video games. These two Nordic video games are no exception, and are using the gruesome and spine-chilling myths to put in the spotlight current societal problems that do not appear in a nation branding context. Differently to the non-Nordic games, *Year Walk* and *Through the Woods* have an insider's perspective into Nordic culture and customs, which they utilize in their games and that show a cultural and societal point of view that is not really in accordance to nation branding efforts by the region. The strength of the Nordic games is that they can take nation branding and nation images of their country and turn it around to show *le revers de la médaille* (the other side of the coin), and draw from another possible branding configuration, utilizing the "dark side" of countries to turn it into a national image – similarly to what has been done with Nordic noir.

Though this study managed to show a connection between nation imaging, nation branding and video games, it is not possible to generalize these findings due to the small scale of the study. The study, however, opens up a research topic which could be used as a solid base for further research connected to the diverse aspects of video games as a potential medium for nation branding. A large-scale research based on the concepts of video games and nation branding could be pursued; another fascinating topic to be studied could be the effect of mass media on nation branding efforts. Such study could be beneficial in the domain of video games study, to highlight the contemporariness of the media, but also to nation branding studies, to offer a perspective that might be valuable in understanding why certain efforts remain vain. Other possible studies could include research on the practices of external branding on the Nordic region, as well as the Nordic region branding efforts in opposition to the perceived negative sides of Nordic societies, as expressed about through various media

(video games, books, TV series...). Expanding on the thoughts of players in such studies would be an interesting addition, to see what they respond to in terms of nation imaging in video games.

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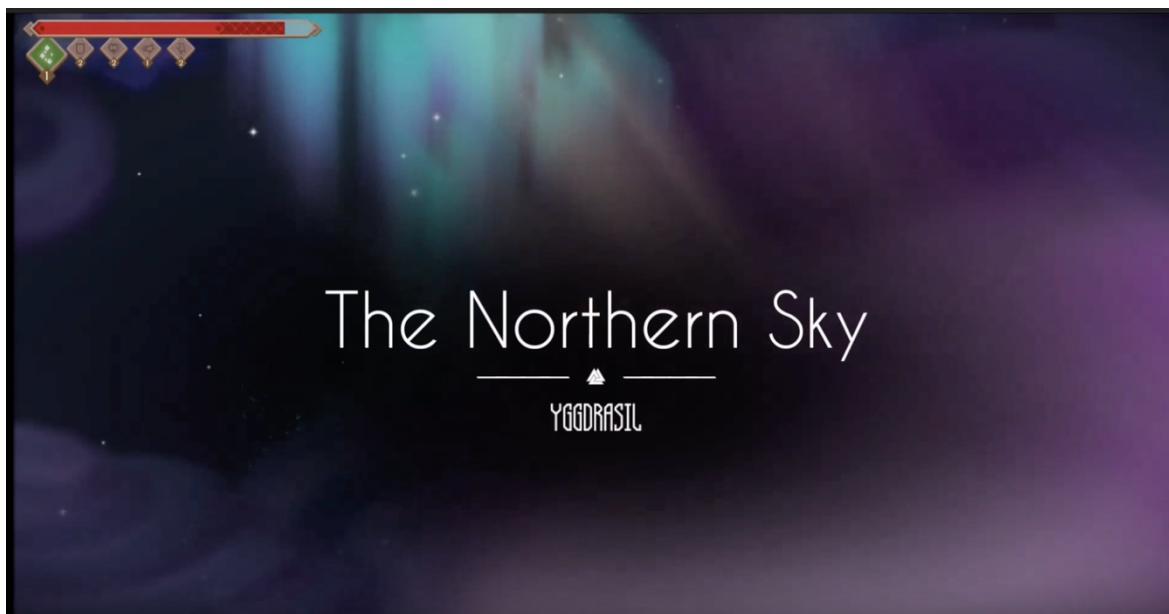


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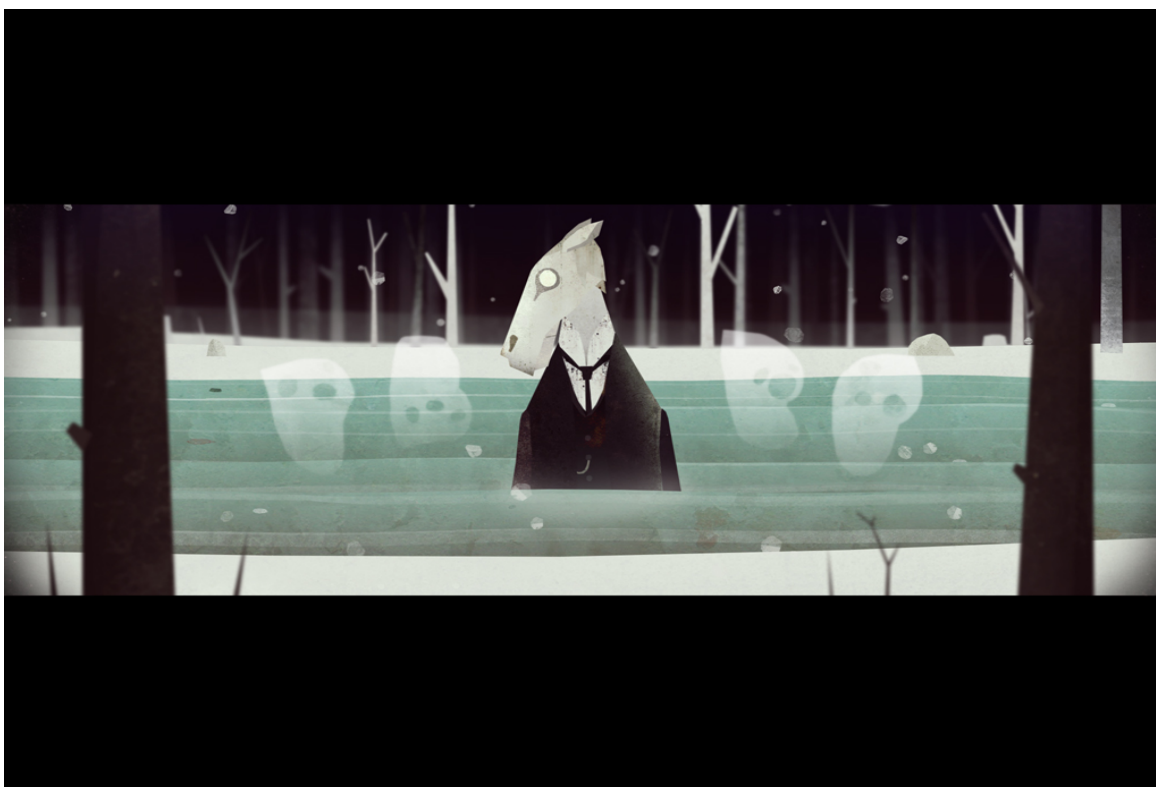


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Appendices

Appendix A: Screenshot on a player review on the game Jotun (from the video game platform Steam).



The screenshot shows a Steam review interface. At the top, the user's profile picture (a cartoon character with a beard and a red hat) is next to the name 'Aleonymous'. To the right of the name are the links 'Reviews' and 'Jotun: Valhalla Edition'. Below this, a dark blue box contains the text '16 people found this review helpful' and '1 person found this review funny'. To the left of the 'Recommended' status is a blue thumbs-up icon. The 'Recommended' status is followed by the text '0.0 hrs last two weeks / 8.8 hrs on record'. Below this, the review's timestamp is shown: 'Posted: 28 Dec, 2015 @ 12:50am' and 'Updated: 28 Dec, 2015 @ 1:13am'. The main body of the review text describes the game as an action adventure set in Norse mythology, played from an isometric 2.5D camera, where the player controls Thora, a Viking warrior, on a quest to 'Impress the Gods' and enter Valhalla. It mentions finding 'Runes' and defeating 'Jotun' (giants). The review also states that the game was developed by Thunder Lotus Games and funded on Kickstarter in mid-2014. A section titled 'Game description' follows, detailing the game's structure, including the 'Ginungagap' realm and the ability to teleport back to it.

Aleonymous » Reviews » Jotun: Valhalla Edition

16 people found this review helpful
1 person found this review funny

 **Recommended**
0.0 hrs last two weeks / 8.8 hrs on record

Posted: 28 Dec, 2015 @ 12:50am
Updated: 28 Dec, 2015 @ 1:13am

Jotun is an action adventure game set in the **Norse**-mythology world and viewed from an isometric 2.5D parallaxing camera. You play Thora, a Viking warrior in a quest to "**Impress the Gods**" (the catch-phrase of game) and enter Valhalla. To do so, she must brave nine perilous "Realms" (levels), find the secret "Runes" (keys) that will allow her to challenge five powerful "Jotun" (giants) in their lairs and defeat them to impress Odin, the Allfather of the Gods.

Jotun was developed by Canada-based Thunder Lotus Games studio and was **funded on Kickstarter** in mid-2014.

Game description

Each time you launch the game you start from "Ginungagap", an ethereal realm in the void between Valhalla and the physical world; no harm can find Thora in Ginungagap and you can teleport back there anytime. The Jotun realms are all directly accessible from Ginungagap and once you find the runes required to unlock the Jotun lairs, you can also access the boss-fights anytime. There is a preferred order in which you must explore the realms and challenge the Jotun and you can redo the realms & bosses anytime (without extra benefit).

Thora has a limited set of moves in her arsenal: a low-damage fast swing, a powerful but slow overhead chop and a roll/dash to dodge attacks. Exploring the nine realms, Thora can find "Ithunn's Apples" that permanently increase her max health and shrines that grant her "God Powers" used to perform special actions, e.g. restore health, move faster, hit harder etc; there is six God-powers to be found and each has 2-3 charges. Thora's health and God-power charges are fully replenished each time she visits a "Mimir's Well"; there's usually a couple of them to be found in each realm (they usually serve as auto-save checkpoints too) and one in the entrance of each Jotun lair.

The giant Jotun bosses each have a unique set of powers/weaknesses and the fights are usually split in 2-3 phases, more difficult as the boss' health decreases. In order to win those fights, you have to figure out the pattern, lay out a plan (involving careful use of Thora's limited resources) and execute it correctly. When killed you are respawned to the entrance of the Jotun lair, at full health, so you can immediately retry the battle.

The rest of the game revolves around exploring the Jotun realms to find the runes, apples and God-powers which will aid you in the boss-fights. Each of the realms has a unique Norse-mythology inspired theme (e.g. magical forest, lava-filled dungeon, frozen lake, stormy cloud-realm etc) and there's some mini-puzzles, some labyrinth-navigating and a few regular enemies to beat. Thora can die in various ways when exploring the Jotun realms, but going through them is relatively easy.

My opinion

The game has beautiful hand-drawn graphics: the sprites are especially well-designed and animated but I think there's room for improvement in some of the background art; it feels like Jotun attempts to define an original style of its own but falls just a bit short of the mark! The music and SFX are nice, sometimes atmospheric and never lacking or annoying; what I mostly liked about the audio is the narrator/voice-over in Icelandic which is heard a few times in each realm/lair, when you reach a key location. The gameplay is solid, mostly revolving around the relatively hard boss fights; my only concern is that the realms you must explore before you challenge the bosses are quite easy and sometimes feel a bit empty. Don't get me wrong: I like how Jotun fuses the Norse mythology in all those "quests", but I just wish there was more to do!

I played with keyboard but a controller would probably be more appropriate. I am not really good at these games and it took me ~8 hours to complete Jotun (find all there is to be found and beat all bosses) and get ~30% of its Steam achievements. I don't find myself replaying the game anytime soon: the story/setting is pretty standard mythology stuff and all there is left to do is beat the bosses in fancy ways, e.g. do them quickly, take no damage, use no God-powers etc. Note that there's no difficulty setting and the game uses only non-intrusive auto-saving. One could argue that the content is bit lacking, but I feel it is OK especially if you get the game on discount.

I can safely recommend this small indie game to lovers of Norse mythology and isometric/2.5D action-adventure games with hand-drawn graphics. If I were to grade my experience with Jotun, I'd give it a 7.5/10.

Appendix B: Screenshot of a player review on the game Jotun (from the video game platform Steam).

 Argonaut » Reviews » Jotun: Valhalla Edition

74 people found this review helpful

 **Not Recommended**
0.0 hrs last two weeks / 6.6 hrs on record

Posted: 16 Jun, 2016 @ 7:11pm

Artistically and visually this game is unquestionably impressive. It manages to create such a magical and mystical atmosphere suiting to **Norse** mythology. Also its soundtrack does a great job at enhancing the drama and tension throughout the game.

On the other hand, I am sorry to say that the rest is so bad and shallow that even a full scale article is not enough to tell what falls so short. But briefly, level designs are incredibly boring and lazy. To solve the puzzles or to obtain items/god powers, only thing you have to do is wandering around aimlessly in literally empty places or dodging things like winds or rocks. There are not any real or difficult enemies or threats around, only annoying mechanics.

Apart from that, boss fights are supposed to give you some tough time but believe me, they are also not difficult, they are just tiring and annoying. Visually it looks gorgeous and you are expecting something epic but after a couple of fight you come to an understanding that if you are ready to spend some frustrating time with dodging things, you are going to beat the Jotuns eventually.

Overall game lacks depth and excitement. Story is like non-exist, it is a linear, uninteresting and uninfluential story with linear gameplay. This game is dealing with one of the most interesting concepts in the world like **Norse** mythology and you are expecting something more clever and epic but it only gives you some shallow level designs and annoying mechanics. It may be visually beautiful but I don't think that it is worthy of your time or money.

Appendix C: Screenshot of a player review on the game Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice (from the video game platform Steam).



HollowPointer

» Reviews » Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice

1,155 people found this review helpful
15 people found this review funny



Recommended

0.0 hrs last two weeks / 8.1 hrs on record

Posted: 11 Aug, 2017 @ 3:46pm

This is my first steam review, and it probably won't be read in the sea of other comments on this title, but I felt that despite years of gaming (okay, decades) I've never felt the urge to strongly recommend a purchase until now. Sure, there are things I would have preferred to be more complex, spoilt by the combat systems of Dark souls and the Witcher, but what's so special about this game is the storytelling and the creative courage Ninja Theory bring.

This isn't just a game. This is a sincere artwork, using game design, to tell the most compelling story about psychosis I've ever experienced. They did their homework, not just with the depiction of mental illness, but also on the wonderful **Norse** mythology, joyously wrestled from the bubblegum claws of Marvel studios and told with all its blood and guts and grim darkness.

Senua is easily the most human heroine I've seen in any game ever, and while there have been more 'strong' female characters, there's no heroism like the heroism of the truly broken and crippled. She has to fight her demons, and it's all the more meaningful because unlike fem-Shepard who eats Reapers for breakfast, you can see in the gorgeously motion captured performance of Senua's face, that she is truly terrified as she fights.

This game is short. This game probably has awful replay value. All the same, this game is a MUST play.

Appendix D: Screenshot of a player review of the game Through the Woods (from the video game platform Steam).



Wotan » Reviews » Through the Woods

12 people found this review helpful



Recommended

0.0 hrs last two weeks / 10.9 hrs on record

Posted: 23 Dec, 2016 @ 3:01pm

A very cosy game set in a Scandinavian milieu, which is easy to appreciate as a fellow Scandinavian. Many games have environments based upon US or other vast countries. For a change it was nice to roam Norwegian forests and sneak past elements from stories from our northern cultures. The touch of Norwegian speech in the game was a great touch, however the voice acting could have been improved quite a bit.

I had some problems graphically with low fps although not running on super high settings. My fps got strangely enough better the further into the game that I got.

The duration of the game was near perfect in context to the content. Games that have a few features and continue to repeat them over and over tend to get boring. In this game, you saw, you ran/sneaked/gazed, and you continued.

I missed puzzles in the game, I was mostly just trying to find my way through the woods, which in one way gave me a feeling of actually being in the woods. I also missed some kind of obligatory pure chase moment (I sneak too well).

And, as an achievement hunter I must say that all developers, who add collectibles that stack over playtimes and are saved immediately when you find them, deserve some kind of credit.

8/10. Esp... Through the Woods, jeg er glad i deg.

Appendix E: Screenshot of a player review of the game Through the Woods (from the video game platform Steam).

**TKQuill** » Reviews » Through the Woods

4 people found this review helpful

**Not Recommended**
0.0 hrs last two weeks / 0.7 hrs on record

Posted: 8 Feb, 2017 @ 12:02pm

This game had potential. I love that it takes place in Norway and contains all kinds of Norwegian mythology and fairy tale creatures, but the voice acting and some of the animation just ruins the whole experience for me.

Both the English and Norwegian VA, is so monotone and lifeless at times, that you'd think they just recorded the first readthrough of the script and called it a day.

Maybe that is what they were going for, to make a character that feels somewhat "dead inside", but it doesn't work.

At least not for me.

I can't recommend this game, based on the voice acting alone.

I would say mute the audio and play on, but you need sound to get the full experience and... not die.

Was this review helpful? ☒ Yes ☐ No ☐ Funny 

Appendix F: Screenshot of a player review of the game Year Walk (from the video game platform Steam).



Salte Pär » Reviews » Year Walk

4 people found this review helpful



Recommended

0.0 hrs last two weeks / 1.8 hrs on record

Posted: 6 Apr, 2014 @ 11:45pm
Updated: 6 Apr, 2014 @ 11:49pm

Year Walk is a beautiful horror game that takes place in the cold, Swedish winter landscape. I just have to mention how glad I am to see the Swedish folklore being presented in such a visually enchanting game, I hope that we will get to see more games with this theme in the future. And also it is really cool to see a modern horror game that relies on a haunting atmosphere rather than cheap tricks such as constant jumpscare. I would recommend any horror fan to pick this up right now, it is definitely worth the money. All in all this is probably one of the greatest interpretations of Swedish folklore that I've ever seen.

+: Amazing atmosphere and beautiful design, very reasonable price considering that it's a pretty short game, Unusual theme and setting.
-: Some of the puzzles are rather frustrating. One could consider it to be way to short.

Was this review helpful?

 Yes

 No

 Funny



Appendix G: Screenshot of a player review of the game Year Walk (from the video game platform Steam).



Pyros » Reviews » Year Walk

3 people found this review helpful



Not Recommended

0.0 hrs last two weeks / 1.9 hrs on record

Posted: 6 Jul, 2017 @ 8:55pm

Year Walk is a charming little game with spooky Swedish folklore that can be completed in less than two hours. However, reading about the spooky Swedish folklore is the best part of the game, which is mostly about swiping left and right and up and down a forest in a fetch quest for runes. I don't regret playing it, but it's so short and so easy that I didn't find it worth keeping in my Steam library and quickly asked for a refund. Sorry Simogo - you had something good there, but not long and "game" enough for me.

Was this review helpful?

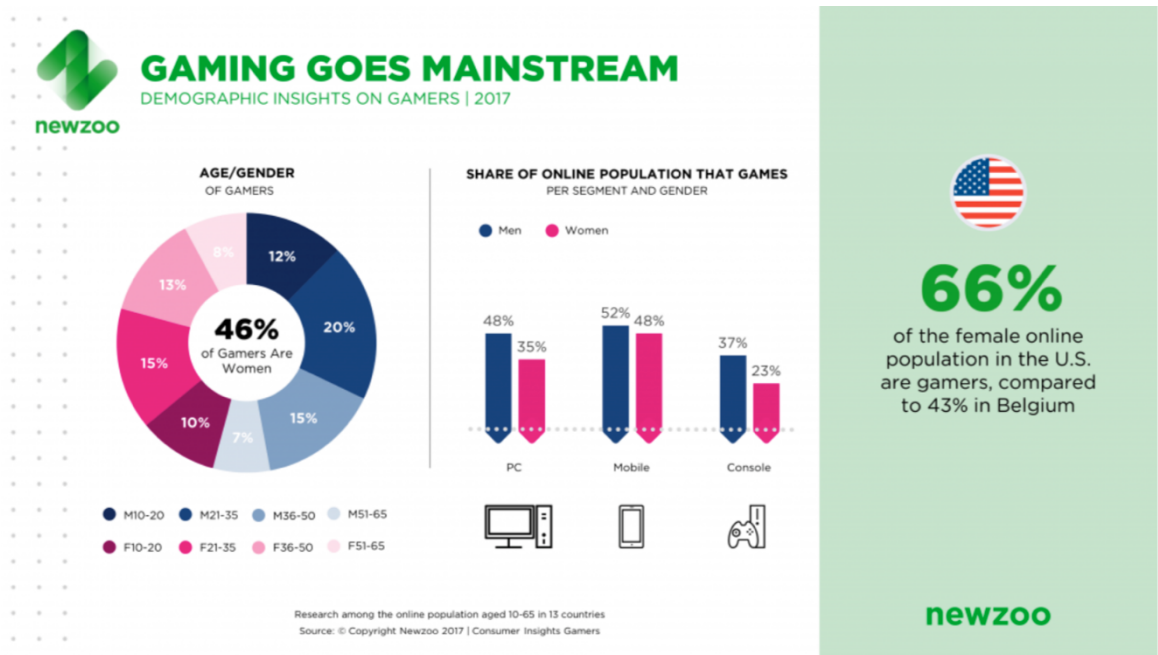
👍 Yes

👎 No

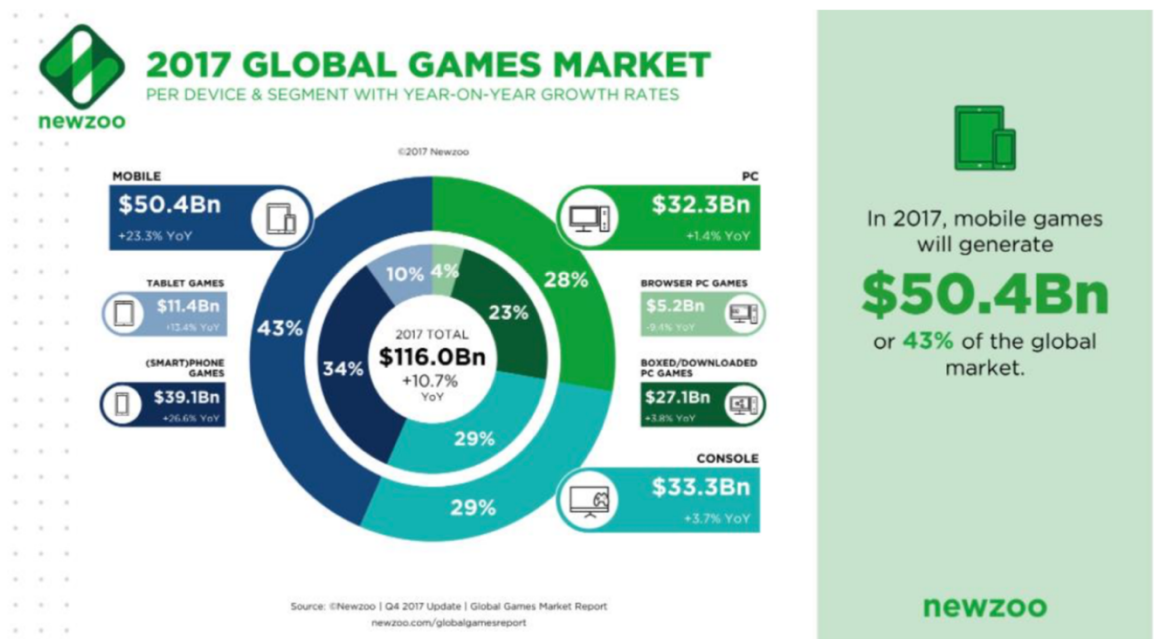
😄 Funny

🚩

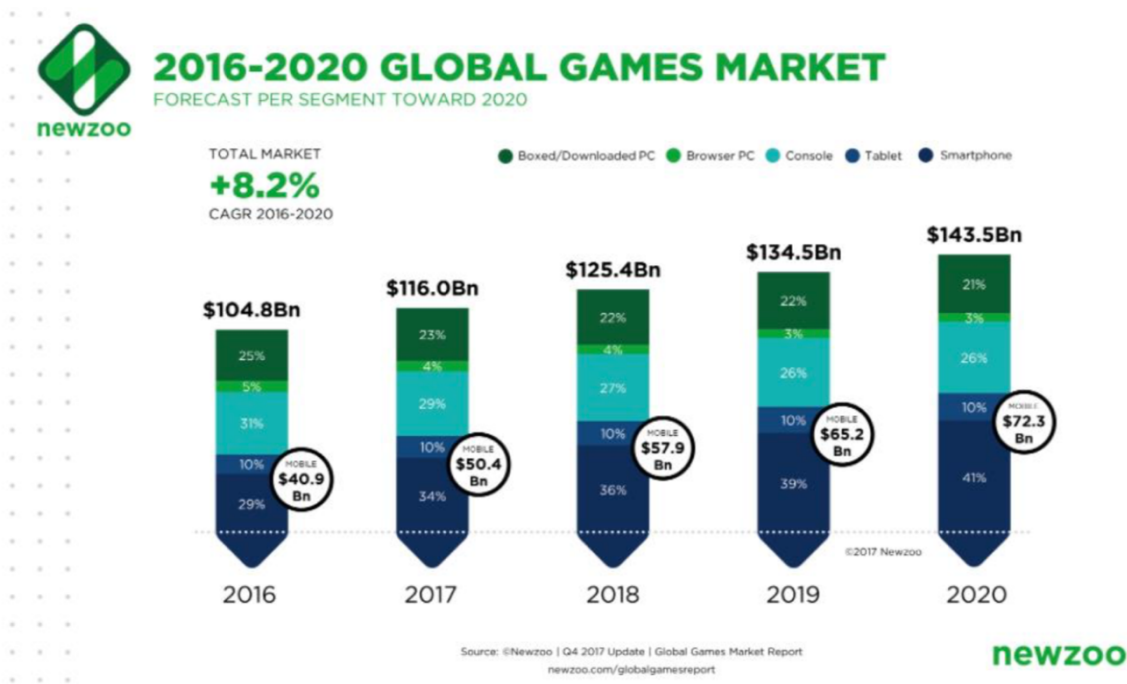
Appendix H: Gaming goes mainstream: Demographic Insight on Gamers 2017, Newzoo.



Appendix I: 2017 Global Games Market Per Device and Segment With Year-on-year Growth Rates, Newzoo.



Appendix J: 2016-2020 Global Games Market: Forecast Per Segment toward 2020, Newzoo.



Appendix K: Interview questions.

- **HellBlade: Senua's Sacrifice:**

1. What made you choose Norse mythology for your game, over Celtic mythology (as your main character is Celtic)?
2. Did you have previous knowledge of Norse mythology, or did you look it up as you went for the purpose of the game?
3. Did you have the intention to show a certain image of Scandinavia / Vikings / Norse mythology through your game? If so, which parts did you want to portray? If not, in your opinion, what image of Scandinavia / Vikings / Norse mythology does your game convey?

- **Jotun:**

1. What made you decide to use Norse mythology in your game?
2. Where did you draw your inspiration from?
3. Did you have previous knowledge of Norse mythology, or did you look it up as you went for the purpose of the game?
4. Why did you decide to make a hand-drawn game?
5. Did you have the intention to show a certain image of Scandinavia through your game? If so, which parts did you want to portray? If not, in your opinion, what image of Scandinavia / Vikings / Norse mythology does your game convey?
6. In your Dev's blog short Q&A in February 2015, you posted and answered the following question:

Q: Hey, (insert actual mythological fact here) is not correct in Jotun! Why?

A: While Jotun is heavily inspired by the Norse legends, the game has some adaptations from the actual mythology in order to make for a better game experience. For example, there is no purgatory in Norse mythology, only Hel, Valhalla and Freyja's Folkvangr. We love reading the Eddas, but we're not making a reading game. And yes, we know that Jotun is pronounced "Yotun", but we want to avoid typos.

In your adaptations of Norse mythology, did you want to carry a message to your audience about Norse mythology?

- **Through the Woods, Year Walk:**

1. What made you decide to use Norse mythology in your game?
2. Where did you draw your inspiration from?
3. How much is Norse mythology and how much is your own imagination?
4. Did you have previous knowledge of Norse mythology, or did you look it up as you went for the purpose of the game?
5. Did you have the intention to show a certain image of Norway / Sweden through your game? If so, which parts did you want to portray? If not, in your opinion, what image of Norway / Sweden / Scandinavia / Vikings / Norse mythology does your game convey?

- **Nation branding:**

1. Do you think video games can participate in promoting a country along with other forms of arts and design?
2. Do you think video games could be a platform to promote innovation and tech from the Nordic countries?
3. Would you include video games in a project like Nordic Cool 2013 in the future?
4. Are there images of the Nordic countries abroad that you are trying to improve, or counter, with the help of events like Nordic Cool 2013?

Appendix L: Interview with Stian M. Willums, Antagonist, 22/11/2017.

Through the Woods, Antagonist.

Interview of Stian M. Willums, Character Artist and Co-Founder of Antagonist.

By e-mail on 22/11/2017.

What made you decide to use Norse mythology in your game?

I believe that Norse mythology and old nordic traditions and myths stand the Scandinavian people close. We grow up with dark mysterious tales and learn more about our ancestors in a more realistic way than other countries do, during childhood and in school. We can better relate to the stories and facts because of our language, the culture (traditions) and being able

to physically experience our fantastical environments. Because of this it is many a Norwegian's dream to make their own version of this universe in some way or another, be that art, books or music etc.

A game is even more powerful because we can put all of those elements into it! Norse mythology and Norway in general stood strongly with the majority of the team and we will continue using our knowledge in our projects to come.

Where did you draw your inspiration from?

I was personally responsible for most of the lore in Through the Woods and have done a lot of research on old Norwegian history and Norse mythology over many years now. As mentioned with the previous question we're also naturally inspired by folktales and myths or "sagn" as we call them, and our cabins for instance are usually filled with small troll figures, wood carvings and old paintings. Paintings by artists like Theodor Kittelsen and Lars Hertevig were of great reference when it came to the aesthetics of the game and music by for instance Wardruna (used in the Vikings tv-show) for mood and inspiration for some of the soundtracks.

Our antagonist is based on an old folktale, particularly known on the western coast of Norway, about Old Erik or "Gamlerik" in Norwegian, that most of our parents have heard in their youth. The game story itself is basically the aftermath of Ragnarok as told in Edda, with some creative alterations, and the rest of the lore is gathered from Scandinavian folktales, fairy tales, legends and books like Edda and Snorri Sturlason's Saga. I even did some research about the Norse language and did my best to construct some good dialogues for some of the creatures and this knowledge will be useful in our future games as well!

How much is Norse mythology and how much is your own imagination?

As you will understand from the other questions we tried to tie most areas to Norse mythology and always looked for relevant people or creatures from the "sagas" to use directly or heavily inspire the characters in the game. Most of the folktale creatures can also be compared and tied to Norse mythology, but honestly a lot of them have been developed long after the end of the Viking era. The story has been altered as well from what's being told about Ragnarok, but in a believable way, prophecies gone wrong if you will. All places

are mostly fictional and every character appearance is just based on the written descriptions from old. In my opinion, a game with strict rules to follow what is known about Norse mythology would become rather difficult and strange without any deviations. People's knowledge about Norse mythology is mostly known from the younger- and elder Edda and was written around 150 years after the Viking age was considered ended. Norse mythology was also developed over many centuries and was most likely very different from area to area. Presumably the same characters go by many different names and history seems to have altered some of the details caused by cultural changes (in my opinion).

Did you have any previous knowledge of Norse mythology, or did you look it up as you went for the purpose of the game?

A combination of both really. We all had different levels of knowledge when we started out, but everybody knew a fair bit. We did a great deal of research and wanted to explore some of the less used elements both because it's more original and it's always interesting to learn about new things, especially when it comes to ancient history and culture. We learned A LOT of additional information that isn't used in the game or was even used to build the universe, but not specifically mentioned anywhere. We made our own little Wiki to build a consistent world. Of course we also had to fill in big parts of the game and story which is also drawn from more modern sides of Scandinavian culture.

Did you have the intention to show a certain image of Norway through your game?

We have stood by that we wanted to make people see the forest as we did when we were children; Big, dark and mysterious and with possible legendary creatures appearing from anywhere, every other rock or tree stump looking like some completely unknown being. Except from that we spent a lot of time trying to make the game look and feel unique, in a Norwegian way, and we feel like we managed that with the art and sound design. When it comes to the characters of the game, for Through the Woods in particular, we just wanted the game to be dark and scary, so the vikings themselves are quite helpless and just wants to be left alone, protecting their children. The viking villagers the player meets in the game are also intentionally dressed up in very simple outfits to make them more human than how the stereotypical viking or "Norseman" is portrayed.

The Norsemen were also good farmers, adventurous explorers and traders, and skilled sophisticated fighters hired by many nations as mercenaries to protect them. In the future we also want to try explore and convey more about these sides of the Norse people because there is so many cool and mysterious elements to bring to the table. For our next game we go more into the cultural side; Where the Norse mythology originated from (Proto-Norse), how it influenced the Christianity in Norway and more about how they performed crafts and magic rituals.